

**6** WORLD

**8** NATION

- Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's rebel-held capital and port city
- 'Unfortunate and biased': Pakistan on US sanction
- Conspiracy to save Amit Shah's skin: Priyanka
- Cong ncluded Ambedkar's shameful cartoon in NCERT book in 2012: Pradhan

## Assam Police nab 8 'fundamentalists'

Arrested persons planning subversive activities: Police ● Arrests made in Assam, West Bengal and Kerala



HT Bureau

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** The Assam Police have apprehended 8 fundamentalists with the active assistance from West Bengal and Kerala police thereby busting an attempt to carry out subversive activities across the country, a top official said on Thursday.

The Special Director General of Police (SDGP) Harmeet Singh informed that the arrests were made on the intervening night of December 17-18 from Assam, West Bengal, and Kerala under 'Operation Praghat'.

"The operation was launched by the Special Task Force (STF) of the

state police in November," Singh informed during the press conference in Guwahati.

Those arrested allegedly had handlers in Pakistan and Bangladesh and they were working on plans to assassinate Hindu and RSS leaders, he added.

"In a major intelligence-led inter-state operation, undertaken with the active assistance of the Kerala and West Bengal Police against a known global terrorist organisation, the Assam Police Special Task Force (STF) has arrested eight fundamentalists, thus unearthing a terror module which was preparing

(CONTD. ON PG-2)

## 'Cong forcibly tried to enter Raj Bhavan'

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday alleged that Congress leaders had attempted to enter Raj Bhavan here forcibly during protest and the authorities have ordered an inquiry into the incident.

The opposition party on Wednesday organised a protest march to Raj Bhavan against a range of issues, including unrest in Manipur and bribery charges against Adani Group. The party alleged that a 45-year-old Congress worker died "due to tear gas smoke" during the melee.

"The institution of the Governor stands above partisan politics. Yesterday, Congress party leaders attempted to forcibly enter Raj Bhavan by breaching police barricades and causing chaos in the vicinity. The police will register an FIR and conduct a thorough inquiry into the incident, including a review of video recordings," the chief minister said in a post on X.

Sarma said that henceforth, no demonstrations will be permitted near Raj Bhavan.

A designated area has already been allocated for protests and demonstrations, he added.

The Chachal area of the city has been (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## Oppn, BJP MPs jostle in Parliament premises

Two Saffron party lawmakers injured ● Rahul refutes woman MP's slur ● Kharge accuses BJP members of injuring his knees

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** The acrimonious face-off between the opposition and ruling NDA over alleged insult to B R Ambedkar took an unprecedented ugly turn in Parliament premises on Thursday with claims of pushing and shoving involving MPs, leaving two BJP members hospitalised and a woman BJP MP accusing Rahul Gandhi of "misbehaving" with her.

The BJP charged the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha with pushing an MP that led to injuries to two of its lawmakers, but Gandhi denied it and said it was he who was pushed by a ruling party member while Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also accused protesting BJP members of shoving him and injuring his knees.

Both sides lodged complaints at Parliament Street police station, blaming each other for what must have been a sordid incident without parallel involving MPs within the premises of Parliament. They also complained to the respective

Chair in the Lok Sabha and the



Rajya Sabha against each other.

BJP MPs Mukesh Rajput and Pratap Chandra Sarangi sustained injuries and were admitted to the RML hospital, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking to them over the phone to enquire about their health.

The hospital's medical superintendent Dr Ajay Shukla said they had sustained head injuries.

"We have filed a complaint against Rahul Gandhi for physical

assault and incitement," BJP MP Anurag Thakur told mediapersons outside the police station.

A number of MPs of the ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance were protesting at the steps of Parliament's 'Makar Dwar', an entrance and exit reserved for lawmakers, against the Congress' alleged insult of Ambedkar, while MPs from the Congress and its allies were demonstrating over

Union home minister Amit Shah's

remarks on Ambedkar and accused the BJP of slighting the architect of the Constitution.

BJP MPs claimed that Gandhi tried to push his way inside Parliament through the middle of the stairs where they were standing, ignoring a side passage, and caused injuries in the ensuing jostling.

However, some opposition MPs claimed that the BJP members refused to give way to Gandhi who was heading to the Lok Sabha to attend the House proceedings.

Rejecting the BJP members' charge, Gandhi told reporters, "I was trying to enter Parliament and the BJP MPs were stopping me, pushing me and threatening me."

The incident happened some minutes before both Houses were to convene at 11 am. The 69-year-old Sarangi, a BJP member from Balasore in Odisha and a former minister, suffered injuries on the left temple. BJP member Nishikant Dubey accused Gandhi of pushing the senior leader. "Are you not ashamed (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## HT BRIEFS

### Women empowerment

**GUWAHATI:** The Assam Government has launched the second phase of the distribution of 'No Dues Certificates' under the Assam Micro Finance Incentive and Relief Scheme, 2021, aimed at empowering women borrowers and providing them with much-needed financial relief, the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) announced on Thursday. As part of the State Government's ongoing '12 Days Of Development' campaign, this phase targets borrowers under Category-III of the scheme, specifically those with debts ranging between ₹ 25,001 and ₹ 50,000. Taking to the micro-blogging platform X, the CMO stated, "Under the #12DaysOfDevelopment campaign led by HCM Dr. @himantabiswa, the Government of Assam will distribute 'No Dues Certificates' under the Assam Micro Finance Incentive and Relief Scheme, 2021."

### Supporting farmers

**GUWAHATI:** In a significant move towards enhancing agricultural productivity and supporting local farmers, Assam Chief Secretary Ravi Kota held a crucial meeting with officials from the Department of Agriculture, representatives from VillageNama, and other stakeholders. Kota announced on Thursday. The discussions revolved around a proposed partnership with VillageNama to establish a Summer Green Vegetable Corridor in Assam, slated for implementation by the next monsoon season. Meanwhile, the initiative, aimed at boosting the availability of locally grown vegetables during the monsoon, will be piloted in Dibrugarh, Guwahati, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Tezpur.

## CBI files supplementary chargesheet against three accused in trading scam

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** The CBI has filed a supplementary chargesheet against three accused persons in connection with an on-line trading scam in Assam, where thousands of gullible investors were duped by offering high returns on deposits. It filed the chargesheet before the Special CBI Court here against the parents - Chabin Barman and Deepali Talukdar Barman - along with lawyer Mukesh Agarwal, of DB Stock Consultancy's owner Deepankar Barman, within 90 days of the arrest of the trio.

All three, along with Deepankar Barman, are currently in judicial custody.

Additional evidence against already charge-sheeted accused Monalisa Das, Deepankar Barman's associate, has also been filed with



the supplementary chargesheet, the CBI said in a release.

The CBI had filed an instant case on October 14 after taking over the investigation of the case, originally registered with Paltan Bazaar police station against DB Stock Consultancy along with Deepankar Barman's close associate Monalisa

Das and seven-eight employees of the firm. It was alleged that the accused persons took money from several clients by convincing them guaranteed returns and gave ₹ 100 stamp paper in return as proof, but until the last three months, they found the payments to be irregular, with many not receiving the money. The release said the complainant further alleged that he invested ₹ 1 crore, and along with him thousands of people invested crores in the organisation, but the accused fled with the sum. Investigation has revealed that DB Stock Consultancy has been accepting deposits from the public on the promise of higher fixed returns, it said. The proprietorship and its key managerial persons have been taking deposits in the name of (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## No notification on Assam panchayat polls without court's permission: HC

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** The Gauhati High Court has directed the Assam State Election Commission not to issue any notification regarding the holding of panchayat polls without its permission.

The court was hearing a bunch of writ petitions, mainly challenging the delimitation of panchayats across the state.

The Assam government had earlier announced that the panchayat elections with newly-delimited constituencies would be completed by February 10 next year.

The matter would be heard again on January 9.

"Till the next date fixed, the respondents shall not issue any notification without leave of the court," a single-judge bench of Justice Soumitra Saikia said in an

order on Wednesday.

The bench, after hearing both sides, noted that the state government has filed its counter affidavit during the course of the day and the counsel for the petitioners prayed for some time to complete his instructions in the matter and requested that the matter be listed next month.

Additional Advocate General K Konwar, appearing for the state government, and R Dubey, appearing for the Election Commission, submitted before the court that the notification for polls will be issued by the State Election Commission.

Dubey said that the process is underway and the electoral rolls are presently being finalised, and once the process is over, the election (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## BJP govt asked 'X' to delete Amit Shah's RS speech: Cong

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Citing an email, the Congress on Thursday claimed that the BJP government has asked social media platform 'X' to remove the speech of Home Minister Amit Shah made in the Rajya Sabha, which it said "insulted" B a b a s h a b Ambedkar.

There was no official confirmation from either the BJP or X on the Congress' claims.

The party reiterated that Shah had committed an "unforgivable crime" for which the home minister should apologise to the nation and resign.

Addressing a press conference here, Congress spokesperson and chairperson of the Social Media and

Digital Platforms Supriya Shrinete claimed that Congress leaders, its MPs, and the party's official handle, including herself, had received an email from the 'X', saying the government of India had asked it to delete Shah's speech shared by them.

She, however, added that the 'X' platform had refused to delete it in the spirit of freedom of speech. She said if Shah thinks there is nothing wrong in his speech, why has his ministry asked the 'X' to delete it. Shrinete made it clear that what they had shared was the original speech of Shah and it was not edited or distorted.

Besides, she also showed the 34-page unedited text of his speech available on (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## Closely monitoring situation: India on attacks on minorities in B'desh

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** India on Thursday said it is concerned over incidents of violence against Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh and asserted that the primary responsibility to protect their life and liberty rests with the interim government in Dhaka.

The comments by minister of state for external affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh in Rajya Sabha came days after foreign secretary Vikram Misri travelled to Dhaka and conveyed New Delhi's concerns on the matter to the top political brass of Bangladesh's interim government.

India continues to monitor the situation related to the minorities in Bangladesh closely, he said, adding that the government in that country has reportedly arrested 70 people and filed 88 cases in connection with violence involving minorities.

"India's concerns regarding the need to ensure the safety and pro-

tection of Hindus and all other minority communities in Bangladesh have been conveyed and reiterated to the authorities of the Interim government of Bangladesh on various occasions, including at the highest level," Singh said.

The minister made the remarks responding to separate questions on the situation in Bangladesh.

"The high commission of India in Dhaka also continues to be in regular touch with the authorities of Bangladesh with regard to the welfare of minorities," he said.

"The primary responsibility for the protection of life and liberty of all citizens of Bangladesh, including minorities, rests with the government of Bangladesh," he added.

Singh also cited instances of attacks on Hindus and other minorities, and at their homes, businesses, and temples across Bangladesh. "Reports of attacks on temples

and puja mandaps also came to light during the recent Durga Puja festival in Bangladesh," he said.

"The government had expressed its serious concerns regarding the attack on a Puja mandap in Tantibazar, Dhaka and theft at the Jeshoreshwari Kali temple at Satkhira during Durga Puja," Singh said. Following these attacks, the Bangladesh government issued instructions for providing special security, including deployment of army and Border Guards, to ensure peaceful celebrations of Durga Puja, he said.

The minister said Bangladesh is expected to take all necessary measures to ensure the safety and welfare of Hindus and other minorities.

"The same has also been reiterated during the visit of the foreign secretary to Bangladesh on December 9," Singh said. Ties between India and (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## Shah to chair NEC meet in Agartala tomorrow

**AGARTALA, Dec 19:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah is scheduled to chair the plenary session of the North Eastern Council (NEC) here on Saturday, an official said.

DoNER minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, along with governors, chief ministers of all eight North-eastern states, and senior officials will also attend the meet.

"Union home minister Amit Shah is scheduled to arrive here on Friday to chair the 72nd plenary session of the NEC to be held at Prajna Bhavan on Saturday," West Tripura district magistrate Vishal Kumar told PTI on Thursday.

In addition to the NEC plenary, Shah will hold a bankers' meeting to review financial inclusion, credit delivery, priority sector lending, and digital inclusion, he added.

Shah will also visit the Bru (Reang) settlement camp at Bruhpara and address a public meeting at Masuraipara in the Dhalai district on Sunday, director of information and cultural affairs department, (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## CM ends Bhutan visit

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday reiterated the commitment to ensure that the northeastern state plays a pivotal role in strengthening the bond between India and Bhutan.

Sarma made the remarks as he concluded his four-day trip to the neighbouring country on Thursday.

"As Rimiki and I conclude our unforgettable visit to Bhutan, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the wonderful people of Bhutan for their warmth and generosity," Sarma wrote on X.

"We return home with cherished memories, invaluable learnings, and a renewed commitment to ensuring that (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## 'Tobacco-related diseases place an unsustainable burden on health system'

### Experts call for higher 'Sin Tax' on tobacco to curb consumption

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Ahead of a crucial GST Council meeting on tax rationalisation health and economic experts have called for a higher 'Sin Tax' on tobacco and similar harmful products to curb their consumption and bolster public health and the economy.

At a webinar organised by 'Tobacco Free India', a citizens' initiative, experts endorsed the recent recommendation by the group of ministers (GoM) for a 35 per cent 'Sin Tax' slab on tobacco products, up from the current 28 per cent.

They argued that increasing taxes on tobacco would not only save lives but also strengthen the economy and advance the vision of a healthy and Viksit Bharat.

They emphasised that this step would curb tobacco consumption



and fund preventive healthcare initiatives.

"Tobacco-related diseases place an unsustainable burden on India's health system. Tax hikes have proven globally effective in reducing tobacco consumption," said Dr

Alok Thakar, head of the National Cancer Institute, Govt of India and professor at AIIMS, New Delhi.

He also suggested that India must include all tobacco products under a stronger tax net to prevent users from shifting to cheaper,

harmful alternatives.

The GST Council, chaired by Bihar deputy chief minister Samrat Chaudhary, is scheduled to meet on December 21 to deliberate on the GoM's proposals.

These include introducing a new 35 per cent slab for Sin Goods like tobacco and aerated drinks while reducing GST rates on essential goods like notebooks, bottled water and bicycles as well as lowering premiums on health and life insurance.

Experts argue that the increased revenue from Sin Goods could help offset these rate cuts, offering relief to citizens while advancing public health goals.

Professor of health economics at the University of Lucknow Dr Arvind Mohan (CONTD. ON PG-2)

## Ganges river dolphin in Assam tagged

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** A male Ganges river dolphin in Assam was tagged and released with the aim to understand their seasonal and migratory patterns and habitat utilisation, particularly in fragmented or disturbed river systems.

The initiative has been conducted under the auspices of the ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC) and implemented by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in collaboration with the Assam Forest Department and biodiversity organisation Aaranyak, with funding from the National CAMPA Authority, according to a release.

This is the first tagging of the species in India under Project Dolphin to undertake a comprehensive range-wide research to develop a conservation action plan, and fill



existing knowledge gaps for the long-term conservation of the species, it said.

The Ganges river dolphin, the national aquatic animal, is unique in its ecology, being nearly blind and relying on echo location for its biological needs.

Approximately 90 per cent of the species' population resides in India, historically distributed across the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna and Karnaphuli river systems. However, its distribution has drastically declined over the past century. Despite its wide (CONTD. ON PG-2)

# Commerce ministry may face possible repeat of 2011 trade data error

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** The commerce ministry this time around may witness a repeat of 2011 when a discrepancy of about USD 9 billion was detected in the trade data for the April-November period.

This time, the issue involves suspected errors in calculating gold import figures for November 2024.

In 2011, there was over-reporting of export data on account of miss-classifications and double counting due to problems in the computer software, which was getting upgraded.

Noticing an unusual surge in the gold imports in November this year, pushing the country's trade deficit to a record, a commerce ministry official on Wednesday said that DGCI&S (Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics) has taken up detailed examination of the gold import data and reconciliation would be done with the data received by CBIC (Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs).

The country's gold imports in November reached a record high of USD 14.86 billion, registering a four-fold increase, mainly on account of festival and wedding demands. The jump in gold imports pushed the trade deficit (the difference between imports and exports) to a record USD 37.84 billion in November.

Trade experts and jewellers have mixed opinions on the matter, with some suspecting a possible error in the data compilation, while others are stating that double-counting is "very" unlikely.

The downward correction in import data, if any, would lower the trade deficit figures, they added.

"The gold import data in November looks different. It should not be this much high," an official of the gems and jewellery industry said.

However, a trade expert said that it is "very" unlikely that the bill of entry data has been double-counted.

Economic think tank GTRI said there is speculation that some gold



imported may have been double-counted.

However, gold entering the Indian border through a bill of entry filed at Customs alone is the country's import, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said, adding that movements within the country, such as for use in SEZs, EOUs (export oriented units), or Gift City, should not qualify as imports and should not be included in total import data.

"DGCI&S and CBIC may need to verify if there has been any deviation from this practice. The government must address these concerns to ensure trust in data integrity," GTRI founder Ajay Srivastava said.

A major challenge for economic analysts is the lack of detailed data, he added.

"While India has an excellent system for capturing and sharing trade data at a granular level, its production data, managed by MOSPI (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation) or ASI (Annual Survey of Industries), is outdated and cannot be integrated with trade data. This leaves trade negotiators without a clear understanding of domestic production performance for specific products," Srivastava said.

Exports and imports take place mainly from two places – airports and seaports. SEZ (special economic zones) numbers are counted

separately as these zones are treated as foreign entities in terms of provisions related to customs.

All exporters fill shipping bills as per customs rules before a consignment is ready for imports/exports. Export data is collected from that bill as all the details are there. And for imports, there is a bill of entry.

There is a process of online filing of shipping bills/bills of entry through the customs portal. There are various export points in India. Units in SEZ follow the process through their portal integrated with the customs platform.

The Indian Customs EDI System (ICES) is now operational at 245 major customs locations, handling nearly 98 per cent of India's international trade in terms of import and export consignments.

Small and non-EDI ports, where data collection happens manually, cover only 2 per cent of the trade.

All the data then comes to the server of ICEGATE.

The Indian Customs Electronic Gateway (ICEGATE) is the national portal of Indian Customs of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) that provides e-filing services to trade, cargo carriers and other trading partners electronically.

Through this facility, Indian Customs offers a host of services, including electronic filing of the bill of entry (import goods decla-

ration), shipping bills (export goods declaration), and e-payment of customs duty.

ICEGATE is internally linked with multiple partner agencies including the RBI, banks, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT), and the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCI&S).

DGCI&S, an arm of the commerce ministry, takes data from ICEGATE. Non-EDI ports' data directly comes to the DGCI&S. Kolkata-based DGCI&S is the official organisation for the collection, compilation and dissemination of India's trade statistics and commercial information.

About 70,000 exporters and importers account for India's 90 per cent trade.

DGCI&S receives raw data from Customs authorities at ports, airports, and land borders, detailing goods traded, their values, quantities, origin or destination countries, and Harmonized System (HS) codes.

The EDI system automates data transfer from customs to DGCI&S for timely and accurate processing. DGCI&S checks the data for errors, inconsistencies, and duplication, applying validation techniques to ensure accuracy.

The data is categorised by HS codes, commodities, sectors, and trading partners, and aggregated into monthly, quarterly, and annual reports, including details on specific product categories and bilateral trade.

Processed data is analysed to provide insights on trade performance, trends, and deficits or surpluses.

The finalised data is published on the Ministry of Commerce website and in reports like the Monthly Statistics of Foreign Trade of India and the Foreign Trade Statistics of India. Key information is also shared with policymakers, researchers, and international organisations and made available through the DGCI&S portal. (PTI)

## Eicher Trucks & Buses expands in NE

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Eicher Trucks & Buses has expanded its new 3S dealership, Mittal Eicher, in Guwahati, said an official press statement, on Thursday.

According to the statement, strategically positioned in Gorchuk, along NH 27, this state-of-the-art facility is set to meet the growing demands of commercial vehicle customers in Guwahati and across the North-East region.

Speaking at the inauguration, Vinod Aggarwal, MD & CEO, VECV, said, "The North-East region holds immense potential, and this facility will serve as a gateway touchpoint in enhancing customer satisfaction and brand presence."

The modern Mittal Eicher (owned by SBM Group) facility spans 28,500 square feet, features multiple service bays and a spacious display area. Its prime location in Gorchuk ensures easy access for customers seeking Eicher's renowned 3S (Sales, Service, and Spare Parts) offerings, it claimed.

The new dealership strengthens Eicher's foothold in a region critical to India's logistics and transportation landscape.

Guwahati serves as a gateway to the North-East, hosting businesses across e-commerce, parcel and courier services, cement, LPG transportation, and construction. With the government's focus on regional development of North-East, Guwahati's strategic importance in the commercial vehicle sector is set to grow exponentially, it further said.

# Sensex sinks below 80k

Indian markets join global selloff as US Fed indicates fewer rate cuts ahead

**MUMBAI, Dec 19:** Equity benchmark Sensex on Thursday plunged about 965 points to crash below the 80,000 level due to heavy selling in global equities after the US Federal Reserve signalled fewer rate cuts next year. Besides, deep losses in consumer durables, banking and IT stocks amid foreign fund outflows added to the gloom, analysts said.

Falling for the fourth day running, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 964.15 points or 1.20 per cent to settle at 79,218.05. During the day, the blue-chip index cracked 1,162.12 points or 1.44 per cent to 79,020.08.

As many as 2,315 stocks declined while 1,680 advanced and 100 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The NSE Nifty tumbled 247.15 points or 1.02 per cent to sink below the 24,000 mark at 23,951.70.

In the past four days, the BSE benchmark tanked 2,915.07 points or 3.54 per cent and the Nifty declined 816.6 points or 3.29 per cent.

"The Indian market saw a widespread decline following a global sell-off driven by the US Fed's hawkish stance on interest rates. Sectors sensitive to interest rates, such as banking and real estate, significantly bore the brunt."

"However, the BoJ's decision to keep its interest rate steady, which surprised economists, aided in reducing the selling pressure. Despite



this, investor caution persisted amid ongoing FII selling, with a strategic shift towards defensive sectors like pharma as evidenced by their out-performance," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the 30 blue-chip pack, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv, JSW Steel, Bajaj Finance, Asian Paints, ICICI Bank, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra were the biggest laggards.

On the other hand, Sun Pharma, Power Grid and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers.

"Markets were plundered tracking negative global cues as benchmark indices slipped below their psychological levels on broad-based selling after the US Fed's hawkish stance raised concerns over further rate cuts next year. Rising US bond yields have pushed global currencies, including the rupee to new lows, while renewed foreign fund outflows from domes-

tic equities could prompt investors to turn risk averse," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

The rupee dropped 14 paise and breached the crucial 85 level to close at an all-time low of 85.08 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday.

The BSE midcap gauge declined 0.30 per cent and smallcap index dipped 0.28 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT tanked 1.20 per cent, consumer durables (1.15 per cent), IT (1.13 per cent), capital goods (1.07 per cent), tech (1.05 per cent) and financial services (1.05 per cent).

BSE Healthcare emerged as the only gainer.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower.

European markets were trading in the negative territory. Wall Street ended sharply lower on Wednesday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,316.81 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.08 per cent to USD 73.33 a barrel.

The BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled 502.25 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 80,182.20, taking its downward trend to the third day on Wednesday. The Nifty declined 137.15 points or 0.56 per cent to 24,198.85. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1..

## Oppn, BJP MPs jostle

Rahul, you are resorting to rowdy behaviour ('gundagardi'). You pushed an old man," a furious Dubey told Gandhi. "He pushed me," Gandhi countered Dubey, walking off after having a cursory look at Sarangi, who was being attended to by fellow BJP members. Sarangi was later wheeled off to an ambulance.

"Rahul Gandhi pushed an MP, who fell on me and I got injured," he told reporters as BJP members squatted at the Makar Dwar raising slogans against the Congress. Hitting out at Gandhi, parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju said appropriate action would be taken in the matter. "Parliament is not a place to show physical strength. It is not a wrestling ring," he said.(PTI)

## 'Cong forcibly tried

earmarked as the designated spot for protests by various organisations. Meanwhile, the body of the state Congress' Legal Cell member Mridul Islam was laid to rest near his home in the Goromari area of Kamrup district. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Bhupen Borah and working president Jakir Hussain Sikdar, AICC secretary Manoj Chauhan, party MLAs Nandita Das, Rekitabudhin Ahmed, A K Rashid Alam, and Nurul Huda along with several party workers were present there. After Islam's burial, an effigy of Union home minister Amit Shah was burnt near the Congress office in Goromari in protest against Wednesday's police action against demonstrators in which several journalists were also injured. (PTI)

## CBI files supplementary chargesheet

five unregulated schemes promising fixed higher returns, the CBI said. Deposits of more than ₹ 400 crore have been taken by the proprietorship of Deepankar Barman, it said. Chabin Barman, along with his wife Deepali Talukdar Barman and son Deepankar Barman, conspired to promote the unregulated deposit scheme of DB Consultancy at a promotional programme in Guwahati, the release said.

Deepali Talukdar Barman, in association with her family, participated in promoting and running the unregulated deposit scheme, receiving the proceeds which she invested in real estate and other businesses for personal gains, it said. Following Deepankar's instructions, Mukesh Agarwal fabricated fake invoices and adjusted the illicit funds as loans in the firm's books, the CBI said in the release. (PTI)

## No notification on Assam panchayat

notification will be issued. "Under such circumstances, this court is of the view that the matters require an urgent hearing and therefore be listed on 09.01.2025," Justice Saikia said in the order. Advocate AK Talukdar, appearing for one of the petitioners, said, "With this order, panchayat elections cannot now be over by February 10, as the government was trying to push."

A 45-day period is mandatory between polls and the issue of notification, and with the matter now listed for January nine, the election commission will not have the requisite time in hand to complete the process by February 10, he said. "This order is important as once elections are declared, the court cannot interfere except in facilitating its conduct," Talukdar said. (PTI)

## Shah to chair NEC meet

Bimbisar Bhattacharjee, said in a press communiqué on Wednesday. This will be the first time since the historic Bru settlement agreement, signed in July 2018, that the Union home minister will visit the settlement camp to assess the ground reality.

Under the agreement, 32,876 Bru people from 5,407 families have settled in 19 locations in the northeastern state. The Centre had declared a special package of ₹ 661 crore for their rehabilitation.

Shah will also address the national cooperative conference at Rabindra Satabarshiki Bhavan on Sunday before leaving the state. Security has been tightened around the capital town in view of the Union home minister's two-day visit. West Tripura SP Kiran Kumar said. "Around 2,000 Tripura State Rifles (TSR) jawans have been deployed in and around Agartala to ensure foolproof security during the Union home minister's visit and the NEC plenary session. Additionally, around 100 CRPF jawans have been deployed in vulnerable locations, and the BSF has been requested to maintain tight vigilance along the Indo-Bangla border," he added. (PTI)

## CM ends Bhutan visit

Assam plays a pivotal role in strengthening the deep bond between Bharat and Bhutan," he added. Sarma, accompanied by his wife Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, was bid farewell at the airport by Bhutan's foreign minister D N Dhunghyel.

The chief minister was in Bhutan at the invitation of King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk to attend the Himalayan country's National Day on Tuesday. The focus of discussion between the two leaders was on promoting broader regional economic development and strengthening the historical ties between the two neighbours, the chief minister's office had said. He also met Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and his wife Tashi Doma. Discussions with Tobgay addressed matters of mutual interest and exploring avenues to fortify trade partnerships between the two regions, the CMO said. Sarma visited the Indian embassy in Thimphu, Bhutan's prominent spiritual and cultural centre Simtokha Dzong and participated in an event to showcase the forthcoming Advantage Assam investment summit in February during his stay. (PTI)

## Closely monitoring situation

Bangladesh came under severe strain after deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to leave the country in the face of a massive anti-government protest in August. Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus came to power days after Hasina took shelter in India. The relations deteriorated further in recent weeks over attacks on the Hindus and the arrest of Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das. (PTI)

## BJP govt asked 'X'

Claiming this was "insulting and disrespectful" to the architect of the Constitution, the Congress spokesperson said Shah revealed the same mindset of his ideological ancestors who always opposed Ambedkar and condemned him as "anti-Hindu". Shrinete also condemned the BJP and its 'X' handlers for distorting a picture of the Congress leaders carrying the photographs of Ambedkar while protesting against Shah's insult of him. She pointed out how on the BJP 'X' handle Ambedkar's picture was replaced with that of George Soros, whom the BJP calls "anti-national". "How dare the BJP replace Dr Ambedkar's picture? This is the same ease with which they think they can replace India's Constitution," she asserted. Reiterating her party's demand that Shah must apologise to the nation and tender his resignation, Shrinete said, the Congress will not be intimidated or cowed down with such arm-twisting tactics by the BJP. She alleged that BJP leaders like Shah and their official social media accounts are displaying the same disregard and hatred towards Ambedkar that their forefathers and the RSS have always had. The opposition party's attack came over a social media post by the BJP in which it posted a photograph from the INDIA bloc MPs' protest in Parliament on Wednesday against Shah's remarks.(PTI)

## Ganges river dolphin in

range, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding this species due to its elusive behaviour, it surfaces for only 5-30 seconds at a time, posing a significant challenge in understanding the ecological needs of the species and any scientifically sound conservation interventions. "Tagging river dolphins will contribute to evidence-based conservation strategies that are urgently needed for this species. I am delighted that this historic step has been undertaken", Wildlife Institute of India (WII) director Virendra R Tiwari said.

Project investigator Vishnupriya Kolipakam said this is a significant advancement in understanding the ecological needs of river dolphins, which will help conserve critical habitats within these vast river ecosystems.(PTI)

## Experts call for higher 'Sin Tax'

linked tobacco taxation with India's aspiration to become a developed nation. "Tobacco use compromises our greatest asset -- human capital. For the past decade, tax burdens on tobacco products have steadily declined in real terms, falling short of global benchmarks. Reversing this trend through the Sin Tax will send a strong signal about prioritising public health," he said.

He added that India's National Health Policy (2017) and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health (2022) have already prioritised tobacco taxation as a proven measure to reduce consumption. "This aligns taxation with India's vision for growth, where people's well-being drives economic progress," Dr Mohan reiterated. Dr Prashant Kumar Singh, a scientist at ICMR's National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research (NICPR), highlighted tobacco-related mortality, noting that such diseases caused 2.6 million deaths between 2019 and 2021 in India. He emphasised that this is a health emergency demanding urgent intervention.

He highlighted the need to reverse affordability trends caused by rising incomes and stagnant taxation, explaining that increased taxes are not just a revenue tool but a critical step towards discouraging harmful consumption, with WHO standards will ensure strong compliance, reduced consumption, and better health outcomes," he added. (PTI)

## Assam Police nab 8

to strike," Singh said. While briefing media about the said operation, Singh stated that the operation was launched after a detailed and prolonged examination of intelligence inputs regarding the anti-national activities being carried out by a group of individuals, under the direction of one Md Farhan Israk.

Israk is a close associate of Jasimuddin Rahmani, chief of Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

Singh said a Bangladeshi, Md Sad Radi alias Md Shab Seikh, was sent to India in November to spread their ideology and create sleeper cells among like-minded individuals across India to initiate violent and subversive actions. Md Sad Radi visited Assam and West Bengal to meet sleeper cell activists of the banned ABT before he moved to Kerala for the same purpose, where he was nabbed.

"The STF, under the direct supervision of its chief Partha Sarathi Mahanta, launched the operation and teams were dispatched to various parts of the country to identify the jihadi elements. During simultaneous operations in Kerala, West Bengal, and Assam, the arrests were made," the SDGP said.

Five arrests were made in Assam, two in West Bengal and one in Kerala, he said, adding that four other persons from Kokrajhar district were picked up but were released after preliminary investigation as no such clear evidence has yet been found regarding their involvement.

Incriminating documents and mobile phones were seized from the accused, which indicates their continuous communication with Bangladesh and Pakistan-based entities over the last couple of months, the top cop said.

Texts with distorted religious beliefs relating to Jihad, religious books with distorted narratives, printed and published in Bangladesh, four pen drives, and various Bangladeshi certificates issued in the name of Md Sad Radi were also seized from the accused. (With inputs from PTI)

# NSDC International and PhysicsWallah collaborates to launch BIG

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** National Skill Development Corporation International (NSDC International) and PhysicsWallah (PW), an Indian edtech company have jointly launched an initiative known as Bharat Innovation Global Private Limited (BIG).

It focuses on aligning education with the demands of the workforce, bridging the gap between academics and employability through flexible, technology-driven learning pathways, an official statement said.

BIG prioritises capacity building for government sector employees, aimed at enhancing their skills and knowledge to meet the evolving demands of modern governance, it claimed.

Through training and upskilling programs, it will be able to support employees in delivering public services and adapt to technological



advancements, the statement further claimed.

The initiative is in alignment with recent developments, such as UGC guidelines permitting courses online and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on flexibility in educa-

tion.

Speaking on the occasion, Ved Mani Tiwari, CEO NSDC and MD NSDC International said, "This collaboration not only reflects NSDC International's commitment to enhancing employability but also aligns with our vision of fos-

tering a skilled workforce that meets the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. Together, we are paving the way for innovative learning pathways that ensures that every learner is job-ready and capable of contributing to India's growth."

Alakh Pandey, founder & CEO of PhysicsWallah (PW), shared his thoughts, "Education is not a one-size-fits-all solution, it's a dynamic and evolving journey that requires collaboration, innovation, and adaptability. At PhysicsWallah (PW), we are aiming to provide support to learners with skills that prepare them for the everchanging world."

"Our partnership with NSDCI through BIG is a step towards making the educational landscape more inclusive. Through this initiative we aim to align education fostering growth at various stages of a learner's life," he further said.

## All party delegation team visits Kokrajhar Assam Assembly Budget Session to be held in Kokrajhar

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, Dec 19:** A one-day Budget Session of Assam Legislative Assembly is set to be held in Bodoland Territorial Council Legislative Assembly (BTCLA) in February 2025 in Kokrajhar.

In this regard, massive preparation and arrangements for hosting the assembly session of the state are going in full swing to meet smoothly successful of the event.

The BTCLA House complex is decorated with attractive look as well healthy beautification along with the BTC Secretariat.

Notably, the Budget Session of the Assam Assembly is to be marked in BTCLA House for the first time in its history of the assembly session.

On Thursday, Assam Legislative Assembly speaker, Biswajit Daimary, visited BTCLA House and BTC Secretariat, Bodofa Nwgrw in Kokrajhar, and participated in a meeting with Pramod Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Katiram Boro, BTC Legislative Assembly speaker, BTR executive members, and officials of the government



of BTR.

The delegation team inspected the preparation and arrangements of the BTCLA House where Budget Session of the Assam Legislative Assembly will be

held in Kokrajhar.

The meeting focussed on preparations for the upcoming one-day Budget Session, which is set to be held in Kokrajhar in February next year.

Earlier, Assembly speaker Biswajit Daimary, and his delegation team offered floral tributes to Bodofa Upendra Nath Brahma in front of the BTC Secretariat, Bodofa Nwgrw.

Later, the delegation team visited at the Dighli along the Bishmuri-Ultapani road to take stock about the condition of the road connectivity as recently state government had sanctioned for road construction in the northern part of the Kokrajhar districts.

The team also visited at the Shyantaibari-Dadgiri Road and Chapaguri-Romari Road in Chirang district as the road construction works under Assam Mala scheme are going on.

The team was accompanied by officials from concerned departments, Government of Assam and BTR.

Speaker of Assam Legislative Assembly, Biswajit Daimary stated that the Assembly delegation team visited at several places in Lower Assam's districts including Kokrajhar, and Chirang to take stock about the ongoing construction sites of roads and bridges in the region.

### Illegal timber seized



**HT Correspondent**

**MARGHERITA, Dec 19:** In a late-night operation on Wednesday, Parasmita Neog, the forest range officer of Lekhapani, and her team intercepted an unauthorised timber-loaded truck on National Highway 315 at Lekhapani under the Digboi Forest Division in Margherita co-district.

The truck, bearing registration number AS 23CC 7993, was transporting illegal timber from Jairampur in Arunachal Pradesh to Mangaldai. The vehicle is reportedly owned by an individual with the surname Kakoty.

The driver, Arun Konwar (40), a resident of Makum in Tinsukia, and his accomplice, Louis Tirkey (27), from Pengree, were arrested during the operation. Both have been sent to Tinsukia District Jail for further legal proceedings.

### Grand assembly of children and guardians to be held in Lakhimpur on December 27

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** A special meeting with a focus on the upcoming of Grand Assembly of Children and Guardians was held at the conference hall of the co-district commissioner's office in Lakhimpur's Fulertal.

As per an official statement, the upcoming of Grand Assembly of Children and Guardians is scheduled to take place on December 27.

The statement said that the guardians will have the opportunity to submit written complaints regarding issues such as housing under the Prime Minister Abbas Yojana (PMAY), ration card discrepancies, lack of cooking gas connections, and other governmental schemes.

"Additionally, any severe complaints involving children can also be reported by socially conscious guardians," the statement added. This initiative promises to be a pivotal step toward addressing child rights and ensuring equitable access to government welfare schemes.

### Sharanan Deva Nath's poetry book 'Sabdasilpar Aakhara' released

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Dec 19:** 'Sabdasilpar Aakhara', an Assamese poetry book by Sharanan Deva Nath, was officially released at a ceremony held on Thursday in the conference hall of Jamuguri Adarsha High School.

The event began with the ceremonial lighting of a lamp by Pankaj Saikia, headmaster of Jamuguri Adarsha High School, followed by a soulful rendition of a Borgeet by Bishalata Nanda Rajangshi.

The book was formally released by an esteemed panel comprising Indra Prasad Saikia, retired professor of THB College; Bhaba Goswami, president of the Baresohoria Bhaona Committee; Ganesh Pathak, retired principal of THB College; Sahabuddin Ahmed, retired professor of THB College; Purna Kumar Sarma, Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize awardee; Geetanjali Mahanta, retired teacher; and Churamoni Sarkar, an assistant teacher.

## Construction of new road overbridge at Panbazar makes steady progress

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** The construction of new road overbridge at Panbazar in Guwahati is making a steady progress, an official statement from NFR said on Thursday.

"The construction of the new wider ROB is progressing steadily under the supervision of the able team of NFR and is expected to be completed soon," the statement added.

As per the statement, the old Panbazar ROB that was constructed in 1965 used to suffer from structural and operational limitations, including insufficient vertical and horizontal clearances leading to a permanent speed restriction of 15 km/h, and creating a "dead wire zone," which used to affect smooth movement of electric locomotives.

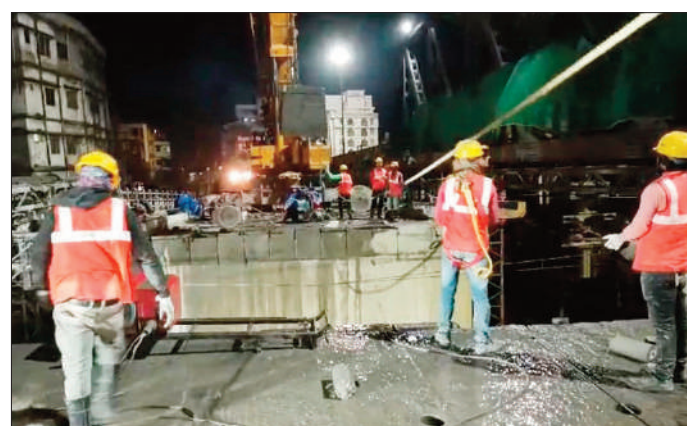
"Furthermore, water logging used to be a recurring challenge, especially during heavy rains, causing signal failures and traffic disruptions, as well as causing inconvenience to passengers," the statement read.

It further said that the new ROB at the Panbazar area aims to address all the limitations of its predecessor

while introducing significant enhancements, adding, "With a longer span of 60 meters, it provides improved vertical and horizontal clearance, eliminating speed restrictions and enabling hindrance-free train movement".

It is worth mentioning that the lifted track levels will also prevent water logging issues, ensuring smooth operations even during monsoons. Additionally, the re-designed structure will facilitate yard remodelling, creating space for additional platforms and passenger amenities at Guwahati station. The new ROB will also allow the movement of over-dimensional consignments and all types of locomotives (electric locos), thereby boosting the region's industrial and economic progress. The new ROB will feature a three-lane wide road, replacing the old bridge having only two lanes, thereby increasing its capacity to handle higher volumes of road traffic. This will ease traffic congestion, thus ensuring smoother and more efficient transportation system for commuters.

As per the statement, the presence of a Fire Brigade station near the project site poses logistical



challenges for stacking construction materials, limiting workspace efficiency.

"In spite of this, notable progress has been made, including the completion of foundational structures; substantial fabrication and transportation of bow string girders and advanced sub-soil improvement using Geo-cell technology," the statement said.

The implementation of Geo-cell technology modern method involves the use of interconnected cells filled with granular material to enhance load distribution and

soil stability. Such techniques ensure the longevity and resilience of infrastructure, aligning with NFR's focus on adopting cutting-edge solutions to bolster railway operations.

Key components of the construction works have undergone successful inspections by authorised agencies. Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, general manager, NFR also inspected the construction site recently, and has instructed all the concerned officials to ensure timely and efficient project execution.

## Mock drill on flood management held in Nagaon



**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Dec 19:** As part of a national-level disaster management exercise, a mock drill on flood management was conducted on Thursday in Nagaon, an official statement said.

The drill aimed to assess the preparedness of various stakeholders in responding to floods.

"The exercise was conducted at multiple locations, including the office of the Nagaon district commissioner

which was designated as the emergency control room. Other locations included a community hall, a health center, and a relief camp," the statement added.

It further said that the mock drill was observed by two experts from the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA). The observers monitored various aspects of the drill, including search and rescue operations, provision of medical aid, and distribution of relief materials, etc.

The successful conduct of the mock drill demonstrated the preparedness of the district administration and other stakeholders in responding to flood-like situations.

Officials as well as other employees from over 16 departments including district administration, police administration and health department participated in the mock drill programme. Bijayanta Goswami, district programme officer, DDMA, Nagaon and Philips VLH, Hrangchal, CEO, DDMA, Nagaon made all arrangements to make the drill a successful one, an official press note added here.

## 'Universities must lead the way in climate change research'

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, Dec 19:** Vice Chancellor of Tezpur University (TU) Prof Shambhu Nath Singh said that universities must lead the way in climate change research here on Thursday.

"Through rigorous research, institutions need to be in the forefront of understanding, mitigating, and adapting to the challenges posed by a warming planet," Prof Singh said while addressing the gathering at the National conference on Climate

Change Impacts, Adaption and Resilience. Delivering the inaugural address, Prof Singh also remarked that universities and research institutions should not be merely passive observers of climate change.

Dr Susheela Negi who was the guest of honour stated that the Centre at Tezpur University is assessing the effect of changing climate and environmental conditions in North-east region.

"Since the region is geo-ecologically fragile, it is significant that the

centre does the research on these areas," Dr Negi added. On the other hand Dr Akhilesh Gupta during his speech highlighted the role DST in India which addresses climate challenges through its various initiatives and research programs.

Keynote and invited speakers present on the occasion were Dr Susheela Negi, Scientist-F and senior director, DST, Dr Akhilesh Gupta, former advisor, DST and Dr N H Ravindranath, former Professor IISc Bangalore.

## DC Yadav hailed the DEIC as a milestone for the district's healthcare 249 children treated on inaugural day of DEIC

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** A total of 249 children got treated during the inauguration of District Early Intervention Centre (DEIC) in Cachar on Thursday.

"On the inaugural day, free medical check-ups and treatment were provided to 249 children, identified under the RBSK program. The children, hailing from four health blocks of the district—Lakhimpur (49), Sonai (48), Bikrampur (43), and Jalalpur (109)—also received free medicines," an official statement said.

The DEIC was inaugurated by district commissioner of Cachar Mridul Yadav.

Speaking at the event, DC Yadav hailed the DEIC as a milestone for the district's healthcare, particularly for children aged 0-18.

He further emphasised that the center will play a crucial role in providing primary treatment and early identification of illnesses with provisions for referral to higher medical facilities when necessary.

"This initiative is expected to ease the burden on the District Hospital (S.M. Dev Civil Hospital) and Silchar Medical College and Hospi-



tal," he added.

The DEIC is an annexe building of the district hospital and aims to cater to children under the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK).

The inauguration ceremony was graced by many key dignitaries, including joint director of health services Dr Ashutosh Barman, S M Dev Civil Hospital superintendent Dr Arup Patoa,

SDM and HO (Epidemic duty) Dr Shibananda Roy, district immunisation officer Dr Abdul Salam Sheikh, DEIC i/c general manager Iqbal Bahar Laskar, and NHM district program manager Rahul Ghosh.

The DEIC is set to serve as a beacon of hope for children and families in Cachar which addresses a range of health issues and enhancing early medical intervention in the district.

## Government has taken several steps to strengthen agricultural economy: Atul Bora



**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Government has taken several steps to strengthen the agricultural economy along with other sectors of the economy, said Assam minister Atul Bora on Thursday.

Bora also said that trade friendly policies have been adopted along with promotion of exports in the agriculture and horticulture sector.

"The State Government has taken a lot of initiatives in the last 2-3 years. It has become very necessary to re-strengthen the rural economy as agriculture is still the main occupation of the residents of the rural areas of our state. Under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, the present State Government has taken several steps to strengthen the agricultural economy along with other sectors of the economy," Bora said while speaking during a conference

on "Capacity Building of Exporters for Enhancing Exports from Assam" which was held at the auditorium of NEDFi House in Guwahati under the initiative of ASSOCHAM.

It is worth mentioning that the event took place with special focus on MSMEs, SCs, STs, women and startups.

Speaking on the occasion Aruna Rajoria, commissioner & secretary to the Government of Assam and commissioner of Agricultural Pro-

duction, Department of Agriculture opined that many products produced in the North Eastern region including Assam are in high demand in the international market.

"Many states have produced some exceptional and unique products which are in great demand around the world. We have a huge demand for turmeric and ginger produced here. But it is a challenge to continue the supply chain. There are a large number of stakeholders involved in the entire export chain. It is an encouraging sign that most of the stakeholders including entrepreneurs are present at today's conference," she added.

She also expected to find out a positive solution for the growth of exports.

Delivering the welcome address at the inaugural ceremony, Sanjeev Narayan, chairman, North Eastern Development Council of ASSOCHAM stated that the progressive journey of economic development of Assam continues.

"Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has stated that the amount of core financial transactions in Assam has increased significantly between 2021 and 2024, which indicates strong positive economic growth. Assam tea has an identity all over the world. Joha rice, bhot jolokia, cane and bamboo products, ginger, fruits, vegetables etc. are exported from Assam," she added.

## Governor congratulates Sahitya Akademi awardees 2024



**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya, extended warm congratulations to awardees for winning the prestigious Sahitya Akademi (Award 2024, an official statement said on Thursday.

The awardees were Sameer Tanti, Deepak Kumar Sharma, and Aron Raja.

"The Governor praised the

awardees, stating that their achievements have once again showcased the state's excellence in literature. He emphasised that the coveted awards are a testament to the state's rich literary talents, capable of dominating any platform," the statement said.

The statement further said the Governor said that their endeavor made the people of Assam proud, adding, "The awards will definitely boost the morale of the upcoming poets and writers to contribute their best to the literary enrichment of the state".

It may be mentioned that Sameer Tanti's poetry collection, "Forongbore Bator Kothe Jane" (in Assamese), Aron Raja's novel, "Swarani Thakhai" (in Bodo), and Dipak Sharma's poetry collection, "Bhaskaracaritam" (in Sanskrit), have been honored with the prestigious award, respectively.

## CEM Debolal Gorlosa distributes appointment letters to 340 candidates in Dima Hasao

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** Chief Executive Member (CEM) of North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) Debolal Gorlosa distributed appointment letters to 340 candidates for teaching positions in the elementary education department, an official statement said on Thursday.

The ceremony took place at the picturesque Haflong Lake Amphitheatre and was attended by several Executive Members (EMs) and Members of the Autonomous Council (MACs).

During the event, Gorlosa expressed heartfelt gratitude to chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for his unwavering support and commitment to rapid developmental initiatives in Dima Hasao. He proudly declared the district as the top performer in competitive exams amongst the ST hills category. Emphasising the importance of a transparent and fair appointment process, Gorlosa encouraged the newly appointed teachers to elevate education in Dima Hasao and to foster a progressive mindset amongst their students. CEM Gorlosa also recognised the tireless efforts of his council team and acknowledged the guidance of education minister Ranaj Peggus, which aided in the successful completion of the recruitment process.

He introduced a remarkable initiative called "Super 30," designed to provide coaching for aspiring candidates preparing for competitive exams, further enhancing educational opportunities in the district.

Donpoinn Thaoson, EM Education, congratulated the successful candidates, expressing hope that these new appointments would significantly address the existing challenges within the education sector. Rupali Langthasa echoed these sentiments, underscoring the potential positive impact on the future of education in Dima Hasao.

This initiative marks a crucial step in strengthening the educational landscape of Dima Hasao, with a collective effort to nurture and develop both students and educators alike.



## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*In life, as in chess, forethought wins*  
-Charles Buxton

## Rights of states in federal structure

The Modi government has introduced a Constitution Amendment Bill, which seeks to damage the Constitution and the federal structure within it. Two Bills were introduced – The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill and The Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill – which seek to ensure simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and all the legislatures of states and union territories. The Bill amends three clauses and introduces a new clause in the Constitution. The purpose of these amendments is to facilitate simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies. For this, the basic principle provided in the Constitution of a five-year term for the Lok Sabha and state legislatures is done away with. One of the amendments states that if the Lok Sabha is dissolved before the end of its full term, elections will be held for the next Lok Sabha only for the period of the unexpired term. This means that if the Lok Sabha is dissolved after three years of its term, the next election will only be for a Lok Sabha that will function for two years.

This truncation of the tenure of a state assembly has serious implications for federalism and the rights of elected state legislators. The federal structure, which is manifested in the Union of States, will get weakened and diluted as the basic right of a five-year term for the assembly gets mutilated. It also opens the way for manipulation by the central government and the ruling party at the centre. For instance, if a state assembly is dissolved after four years of its term due to the fall of the state government, a mid-term election for just the remaining one-year term of the assembly does not make sense. Such a situation will open the way for either horse-trading to prevent the fall of the government or it will be an invitation to impose President's rule in the state.

One of the major arguments advanced by the proponents of the 'One Nation, One Election' system is that it will cut wasteful expenditure incurred due to the multiplicity of elections held at varying times. However, the proposed changes to maintain the alignment of the Parliament and assembly elections opens the way for unnecessary elections in short spans of time. By the Constitutional amendments proposed, there can be an election for a state assembly with a five-year term; then if there is a fall of the state government, a mid-term election for the remainder of the term will be held; following which there will be another election at the end of the five-year term. This means there will be three elections in the space of five years. If such a situation occurs at the Lok Sabha level, there will be three national elections in the space of five years. Such an absurd situation will only multiply the expenditure on polls manifold. There is also a clause introduced, which empowers the Election Commission to decide to delay elections in any state if it thinks the situation warrants it. The EC recommendation will be acted upon by the president. This is a dangerous provision which can be used to subvert the basic right of a state in the federal structure.

## BJP Central leaders may look for new face in West Bengal before 2026 polls

By Tirthankar Mitra

A fountainhead of criticism and opposition to Trinamool Congress (TMC) supremo, Mamata Banerjee leader of the Opposition in West Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari is on a backfoot. And to make matters worse, it is in his own backyard Contai where the state's ruling dispensation's most trenchant critic finds himself with his back to the wall.

This situation has arisen after TMC swept the election of Contai Cooperative Bank on December 15 retaining its winning spree in the Lok Sabha elections and by polls which followed. Incidentally the BJP leader Adhikari cannot accuse TMC of strong arm tactics to win as the cooperative bank election was held under the supervision of central paramilitary forces following court order.

Trouble is at Adhikari's door as TMC claims to have won in 101 seats including 15 for directors in an area where the BJP leader cut his teeth decades ago after entering politics. The BJP bagged a measly 7 seats.

One cannot disagree with Trinamool leadership who feel it is the beginning of the end for BJP in the state as the recent reverse is where its support base was once its strongest. Previous election results affirm BJP's hold in the area as Adhikari's younger brother Dibyendu won from Contai while former judge of Calcutta High Court Abhijit Ganguly whose orders irked the TMC no end was as a BJP nominee from nearby Tamulok Lok Sabha constituency.

On a micro level, the BJP candidates led in 13 out of 14 Assembly segments during the Lok Sabha elections at Contai and Tamulok. One wonders whether it would be premature to conclude that the ground below Suvendu Adhikari's feet is slipping away fast.

The morale of the rank and file of the state BJP is all the more low as the cooperative bank election defeat follows the by-poll reverses in July and November. This year. The defeat is all the more galling for Adhikari as he had served as the chairman of this bank till August 2021. He was removed from his post after Mamata Banerjee government's decision to probe the operation of several cooperative banks where he held a position in several governing bodies.

The latest electoral defeat will

no doubt help Adhikari's public perception that the leader of the Opposition has failed to protect his home turf. Though Sukanta Majumdar heads the state BJP, Adhikari seems to have inched closer to the national leadership by his proactive functioning style but yet slipped in his home turf.

He had a major say in the distribution of nominations in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in West Ben-



gal. But he was pulled up when the number of the party's MPs dropped from 18 to 12 showing the first signs of withering away of his support base.

Adhikari has been in focus ever since December 2020 when he switched loyalty from Trinamool Congress. His stock rose after he defeated chief minister Mamata Banerjee at Nandigram Assembly constituency in the 2021 Assembly elections.

However, it was shrugged off by TMC leadership pointing out that the victory margin was wafer thin. But BJP celebrated it and termed it beginning of the end for Trinamool. Though this victory opened doors for Adhikari in the BJP, successive election results pointed out that the party was going downhill. It also led to spouting of intra-party opposition which was headed by former state BJP chief, Dilip Ghosh.

If the decline in BJP's electoral fortunes continue, Adhikari stands to lose his influence in state BJP, according to party sources. For the successes which Adhikari claims to have achieved, are all flash in the pan variety.

Fact remains that the TMC leadership has been trying to regain the lost ground in Purba Medinipur even as the BJP was gloating over Mamata Banerjee's shock defeat at Nandigram. In 2022, TMC swept the civic body elections in the state including Contai which has been the stronghold of the Adhikaris for decades. It will be seen now whether Suvendu Adhikari's stock with the central leaders declines following serious reverses in his own base. (IPA Service)

# Textbook scarcity in Assam's education - A growing concern

The lack of textbooks in the government schools of Assam has been a significant obstacle to education advancement in the state. Beyond mere inconvenience, this became a challenge that deeply involved students, teachers, and overall educational infrastructure. Being the basic tool for passing curriculum content to students, textbooks play an important role in delivering knowledge to students in an orderly and systematic manner. Hence, the low availability of textbooks in Assam has created a ripple effect on educational outcomes, intensifying inequalities and limiting students' abilities and opportunities, mainly in rural regions. The direct impact of textbook scarcity in Assam's education system would mean a very vivid understanding of its direct effect on students' learning experience, quality of teaching, and eventually on the socio-economic development of the region as well.

Without an adequate number of textbooks, there is a poor setting of learning where students do not get to learn basic things from their curriculum. A textbook is the cornerstone for any learning process; textbooks create structure and consistency in delivering the education. Without textbooks, little in the way of proper knowledge can be achieved by both students and teachers. Students without textbooks cannot follow lessons effectively and miss out on the structured progression of subjects. This usually results in confusion, frustration, and at times, very poor performance in academics altogether, which is contrary to what education may teach. This problem is exacerbated by the general problem of obsolete textbooks, which further spread misinformation or lack of knowledge, particularly in areas where exact and timely information is necessary.

The most significant consequence of this deficit is the increasing educational inequality between urban and rural schools in Assam. While by no means free from the problem, urban schools have larger reserves, such as supplementary learning material, better-trained teachers, and more comprehensive infrastructure. Textbook scarcity hits rural Assam schools far more critically. This is a problem of textbooks in rural areas that affect not only the learning of the students but also makes a sharp contrast between education opportunities for children from well-off urban backgrounds and those in less fortunate rural communities. For many rural students, textbooks serve as a lifeline; most of these students have no other alternatives to resources like libraries, the Internet, or private tutoring. This further entrenches the polarity, reinforcing social and economic imbalances and placing rural students as vastly disadvantaged in comparison to their peers in urban settings. Moreover, textbook scarcity has consequences for state education policy and for delivering a curriculum in Assam. The education system in Assam is based on a state-directed curriculum designed to provide standardized education for all the students within Assam. However, textbook scarcity does not support this aim, since pupils in different regions are exposed to different material at different times or never. This lack of uniformity means that pupils do not always learn the same thing or to the same standard and that again increases academic disparities. For example, pupils in urban schools, where textbooks are more readily available, may learn at a faster pace or receive better use of more in-depth resources than those in rural areas. This variation is a clear breach of the principle of equal access to education and amplifies regional and class differences.

In the classroom, the lack of textbooks remains an additional burden on the teacher. Teachers are

already operating under tough circumstances: big classes, poor infrastructures, and minimal professional development. Such conditions push teachers to adopt lessons that lack the essential tools necessary for effective teaching. Since there are no textbooks, the teacher would rely on handwritten notes, supplementary materials, or even outdated resources; not only does this make their work difficult, but also reduces the quality of education they can provide. The main issue that is likely to be a hindrance to rural teachers is a lack of access to professional training to better cope with resource inadequacies. As a consequence, when textbooks are absent, it makes the process of teaching and learning inefficient; most of the time, teachers cannot go through the curriculum at their best.

### DEGREE OF THOUGHT

Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Textbook scarcity also impacts student performance. Students cannot perform well in examinations or grasp basic concepts when deprived of the most elementary tools of education. A student without a textbook has no source to go to in case of reference, resulting in incomplete learning. This usually leads to mere memorization without proper understanding, and most of the time, the student lags. The long-term implications of this deficiency are serious—the students who are struggling in the early years are bound to face difficulties in subsequent grades, and it creates a cascading effect on their overall academic trajectory. The continued absence of textbooks means that students enter higher grades without the foundational knowledge they need, ultimately hindering their ability to succeed in competitive exams or pursue higher education.

More than this, however, the

textbook crisis has economic implications beyond the sector of education. The long-term lack of educational resources constrains the potential of an entire generation of students and thereby denies them entry into skilled professions or any meaningful contributions to the economy. Education, in a state like Assam, plays a critical role in breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering social mobility. Without sufficient textbooks, however, students are, in effect, denied the knowledge and skills needed to secure good jobs or go on to higher education and, therefore, perpetuate economic inequality. This impacts directly on the economic development of the state because an undereducated workforce cannot participate fully in the modern economy.

Various government and non-government efforts aimed at addressing textbook scarcity have been initiated as a response to its lack. The Assam government had initiated efforts to ensure textbooks were delivered to students in government schools through its "Free Textbook Distribution Scheme." Delays in textbook distribution, inefficiencies in the supply chain, and bureaucratic obstacles have hindered the success of such schemes, and books arrive too late in the academic year or are distributed unevenly so that many schools do not receive adequate stock. This lack of timely and adequate supply ensures that students continue to miss out on the most essential resources needed for their education. Non-governmental organizations and local community groups have also attempted to address this gap, often by providing textbooks or creating alternative educational resources. While these efforts have been helpful in specific cases, they are unable to tackle the systemic nature of the problem.

Digital transformation of education promises to solve the textbook

crisis. The increased availability of the internet and mobile devices makes possible the mass adoption of digital textbooks and online education platforms, hence enrolling students in learning wherever they are. Digital textbooks can be updated continuously, meaning that students will always be at par with current information. However, for this shift to be effective, substantial investments in infrastructure are needed. Schools, particularly in rural areas, would need access to reliable internet connections and sufficient technology to support digital learning. Moreover, teachers would need training to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching methods. This shift to digital education has the potential to overcome many of the limitations posed by shortages of traditional textbooks, insofar as the necessary investments are made.

The textbook scarcity in Assam needs a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach. While the efforts of the government have been valuable, they have proven insufficient against the systemic nature of the problem. Strong measures need to be taken by the state, central government, private sector, and civil society to ensure that textbooks are provided fairly and timely. In the long run, the solution will come in improving the overall infrastructure of Assam's education system, investing in enhancing teachers' training and digital education. To ensure that every Assam student receives the textbooks and education-provisioning to which they are entitled, it is not merely an educational challenge but the socio-economic imperative for its future growth. Only through sustained and collaborative action can Assam overcome this crisis and offer its students the education that they deserve. (The writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-Magazine SAMPROTIK, who can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

## India's diplomatic evolution

By: Satvrat Borah

India's foreign policy has undergone a remarkable transformation over the decades, evolving alongside its aspirations, challenges, and position in the global order. In the years following independence, India embraced a non-alignment policy, a strategy shaped by the need to safeguard its sovereignty amidst the Cold War's bipolar world. This approach allowed India to focus on its internal development without becoming entangled in the ideological conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, as global dynamics shifted, so too did India's approach to engaging with the world. In the early years, non-alignment reflected India's desire to remain neutral while building relationships with multiple nations. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized peaceful coexistence and international cooperation, championing the values of freedom and equality on the global stage. India played a prominent role in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which allowed nations of the Global South to resist the pressures of choosing sides during the Cold War. This stance also aligned with India's focus on domestic challenges, as it needed to prioritize nation-building, industrialization, and poverty alleviation.

As the world moved into the post-Cold War era, India recognized that the existing framework of non-alignment needed to be recalibrated. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unipolar dominance of the United States necessitated a more pragmatic foreign policy. Economic liberalization in the 1990s under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh

marked a significant turning point. The opening of India's economy brought with it the need to engage more deeply with global powers and economic blocs. India's foreign policy began to shift toward a focus on economic partnerships and securing investments to support its development goals.

The 21st century introduced new complexities in global politics. The rise of China as an economic and military power presented both opportunities and challenges for India. While China became a crucial trade partner, its assertive actions along the border and in the Indo-Pacific region underscored the need for India to strengthen its defense and strategic alliances. This was evident in India's growing engagement with the United States, highlighted by agreements such as the Civil Nuclear Deal during Manmohan Singh's tenure as Prime Minister. This agreement not only signaled a deeper strategic partnership but also marked a departure from India's earlier hesitation to align closely with major powers.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has embraced a more assertive and flexible approach to foreign policy, often described as multi-alignment. This approach acknowledges the multipolar nature of the modern world, where nations interact across a spectrum of economic, security, and environmental concerns. India has actively engaged with a diverse range of partners, from traditional allies like Russia to newer collaborations with nations in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. This strategy aims to maximize India's opportunities while minimizing vulnerabilities.

One key feature of India's evolving foreign policy is its focus on strategic autonomy. While India has strengthened its ties with the

United States, particularly through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Japan and Australia, it has also maintained strong relations with Russia. This balancing act reflects India's determination to preserve its independence in decision-making while addressing shared global concerns such as terrorism, climate change, and technological advancements.

The pursuit of economic diplomacy has also become a cornerstone of India's foreign policy. By fostering trade and investment relations, India seeks to enhance its economic growth and create opportunities for its burgeoning population. Agreements such as the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union and membership in organizations like the BRICS group demonstrate India's commitment to global economic integration. Additionally, India's leadership in initiatives like the International Solar Alliance showcases its willingness to address global challenges through innovation and collaboration.

India's foreign policy has also taken on a more humanitarian dimension in recent years. From providing aid to neighboring countries during natural disasters to supplying vaccines to over 100 nations during the COVID-19 pandemic, India has positioned itself as a responsible global actor. These efforts not only bolster India's soft power but also reinforce its image as a nation committed to the welfare of humanity.

Regional diplomacy remains a critical aspect of India's foreign policy. With its immediate neighbors, India has worked to foster connectivity and economic cooperation while addressing shared security concerns. Initiatives like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIM-STEAC) underline India's efforts to promote regional stability and prosperity. However, challenges such as cross-border terrorism and strained relations with Pakistan continue to test India's diplomatic resilience.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central theme in India's foreign policy narrative. Recognizing the strategic importance of this region, India has actively participated in frameworks like the Quad to ensure a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. This vision aligns with India's maritime interests and its role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region.

As India looks to the future, it faces several challenges that will shape its foreign policy trajectory. The rise of artificial intelligence, cyber threats, and climate change demand innovative solutions and international cooperation. Additionally, managing relations with major powers like China and the United States while navigating complex regional dynamics will require strategic foresight and diplomatic agility.

India's journey from non-alignment to multi-alignment reflects its adaptability and determination to assert itself on the global stage. This evolution is driven by a desire to secure its national interests while contributing to global peace and progress. By embracing partnerships, promoting economic growth, and addressing global challenges, India aims to build a future that reflects its values and aspirations. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, India's foreign policy will continue to evolve, shaping and being shaped by the forces of globalization and regional integration.

## Assam's dual climate crisis: Safeguarding livelihoods and heritage against floods and droughts

By: Dipak Kurmi

A recent scientific study has highlighted the growing vulnerability of Assam to dual climate disasters, namely floods and droughts, and underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how the state approaches disaster management. The collaborative research, conducted by IIT Guwahati, IIT Mandi, and the Centre for Study of Science, Technology and Policy, Bengaluru, has identified five districts in Assam—Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, Golaghat, and South Salmara-Mankachar—among the 11 most vulnerable districts in India to dual climate risks. This revelation calls for proactive measures to mitigate these risks and safeguard the socio-economic fabric of Assam's communities.

The study, titled District-Level Climate Risk Assessment for India: Mapping Flood and Drought Risks Using IPCC Framework, emphasizes that traditional post-disaster relief and rehabilitation measures are no longer adequate. Instead, a forward-looking approach that prioritizes prevention, mitigation, and risk reduction is essential to moderate the growing climate risk profile of these districts. By advocating a "multi-scale, sector-specific approach to climate risk assessment and continuous capacity building," the report underscores the need for tailored strategies that address the compound and emerging risks of climate change.

Among the most affected are the Assamese-majority districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, and Golaghat, where

agriculture forms the backbone of livelihoods. Dual disaster risks pose a severe threat to Assamese farmers, many of whom are already economically marginalized. Floods and droughts exacerbate vulnerabilities, rendering farming a non-remunerative practice and pushing farmers into cycles of poverty and hunger. Without adequate protection, these communities risk losing their lands to distress sales, often to non-Assamese entities. The conversion of agricultural land along highways into commercial properties further signals a worrisome trend, one that jeopardizes the economic and cultural integrity of the Assamese community.

In contrast, the immigrant Muslim-majority district of South Salmara-Mankachar illustrates a different trajectory in climate adaptation. Known for their resilience, the immigrant population in this district has demonstrated an ability to adapt by seeking alternative livelihoods, often migrating to urban areas within Assam to work in construction and other menial sectors. This stands in stark contrast to the struggles of Assamese farmers, many of whom migrate outside the region for low-paying, unskilled jobs. This disparity in resilience and adaptation strategies underscores a critical challenge: how to bridge the gap in climate adaptability between these communities.

The dual disaster risks not only threaten the economic livelihoods of Assamese farmers but also pose a deeper threat to Assam's cultural heritage. The loss of land ownership to non-Assamese communities risks altering the demographic profile and cultural landscape of

the region. Stronger land laws to prevent the sale or transfer of land to non-Assamese entities are imperative. While market-driven policies under a neoliberal economy discourage such protective measures, fearing impediments to industrial and infrastructure development, a balanced approach is necessary. Provisions within land laws can ensure that Assamese farmers retain ownership while enabling the state to pursue industrial growth. Moreover, such policies should make indigenous communities stakeholders in development projects, ensuring mutual benefit and sustainability.

Simultaneously, building community resilience is critical. Farmers and their families must be encouraged to acquire skills in other trades to diversify their income streams. Government initiatives to introduce flood- and drought-resilient crop varieties, expand irrigation coverage, promote water conservation techniques such as rainwater harvesting, and enhance agricultural productivity can complement community efforts. Traditional farming practices, validated through scientific research, should also be integrated into climate adaptation strategies to create a harmonious blend of innovation and heritage.

The study's findings also highlight the importance of localized approaches to disaster management. Given the diverse socio-economic conditions across Assam, district-specific or even region-specific solutions are essential. Policies must account for the unique challenges and capacities of each community, ensuring that disaster mitigation strategies are not only effective but also equitable. Inform-

ing communities about their changing risk profiles and involving them in preparedness efforts can foster a sense of agency and reduce dependency on governmental relief measures.

Furthermore, disaster management must move beyond structural and engineered solutions. While flood embankments and drought relief programs are important, they cannot address the root causes of climate vulnerability. A comprehensive framework that combines ecological restoration, socio-economic development, and community empowerment is necessary to build long-term resilience. Collaboration between scientific institutions, government agencies, and local communities will be key to translating research findings into actionable policies.

The report's emphasis on the necessity of a proactive and inclusive approach to disaster risk management comes as a wake-up call for Assam. As climate change continues to intensify, the risks to life, livelihoods, and cultural heritage are set to increase. Building resilience requires not only technical solutions but also a societal commitment to preserving the identity and well-being of vulnerable communities.

Ultimately, the dual disaster risks facing Assam are not merely environmental challenges but existential threats that demand a collective response. By integrating scientific knowledge with community-driven solutions, Assam has the opportunity to lead by example in climate resilience and adaptation, safeguarding its people and heritage for generations to come. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmi@pltd@gmail.com)

# India's semiconductor ambitions could risk worker safety

By: Jason Chelak

India has grand plans for its semiconductor industry. The country is a relatively new entrant to the world of chip manufacturing, dominated by Taiwan, South Korea, and the US. Over the last few years, India has undertaken an unprecedented push for investments in the field. "Our dream is that every device in the world will have an Indian-made chip," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an event in September.

In recent years, New Delhi has invested Rs 76,000 crore into the sector as part of the India Semi-Conductor Mission, providing huge subsidies to companies that plan to manufacture chips in India and hopes to see the industry's value grow from \$29 billion in 2023, to nearly four times its size, to \$109 billion, by 2030.

Such a massive expansion brings with it many questions, such as whether the government's investment will actually result in employment creation to the extent that has been claimed. But amid all the headlines created by India's big push into the sector, one element has gone unreported: what this might mean for Indian workers.

The country already has a poor framework for labour rights in manufacturing industries, especially in occupational health and safety. Evidence from research in other countries and workers' experiences indicates that the chemically intensive process of chip-manufacturing is associated with serious health hazards.

At the same time, the government is planning to codify its labour laws for occupational health and safety with the aim of doing away with regulations that delineate permissible limits for chemicals and toxic substances, while offering no improvement to the infrastructure of monitoring or inspection that could circumvent this gap. Without instituting robust mechanisms and improving existing laws on occupational health and safety, the rapid expansion of the industry in India could have dangerous consequences for its workers.

## Toxic history

The manufacturing of semi-conductors is chemically intensive and involves complex processes that are repeated up to a hundred times, depending on the number of layers on a chip. The industry also closely guards information on the materials used for

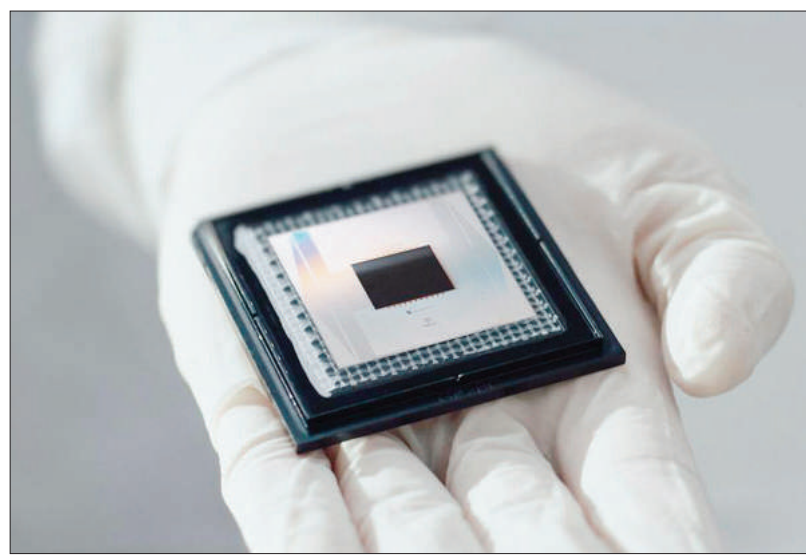
manufacturing. In the early days of the industry, from the 1960s to 1990s, the US was the leading manufacturer of chips and had the highest number of workers employed in the sector. A number of chemicals that workers in the industry were exposed to during the manufacturing process in those years have been linked to cancer, reproductive-health issues and higher rates of miscarriages.

A study conducted in California in the early 1980s showed that the rates of occupational illnesses among workers in the semi-conductor industry were comparatively higher, reaching up to four times those of other industries in 1978, according to data provided by the state's Department of Industrial Relations.

By the 1990s, more data had emerged about health concerns associated with the manufacturing of semi-conductors in the US. In 1992, IBM announced the phasing out of some chemicals – such as ethylene glycol ethers (EGEs) – used in chip manufacturing, following a study commissioned by the company that showed higher than average rates of miscarriages in workers exposed to these compounds. The same year, a study commissioned by the Semi-Conductor Industry Association pointed to high rates of spontaneous abortions among women workers, with levels elevated in those who worked in fabrication areas.

During this time, many semi-conductor manufacturers in the country were sued by workers who had developed cancers, chronic illnesses, and adverse reproductive-health effects, resulting in many out-of-court settlements. In 2006, a study that involved almost 32,000 people working at IBM's factories from 1969 to 2001 showed higher rates of cancers (including cancers associated with the brain, kidney, and skin) than the general population. The data initially came to light following a lawsuit by two IBM workers against the company, which released the information for expert analysis.

Similar health hazards for workers were witnessed when the chip-making industry moved its manufacturing operations to Asia. Research showed that the same chemicals that were "phased out" from chip manufacturing in the US were still being used by manufacturers in South Korea, along with other chemicals with limited information and assessment for toxicity. Workers at chip-making units



were developing leukemia as well as other cancers and tumors, and had higher rates of miscarriages.

Following a long-drawn-out legal battle and public campaign initiated by the families of workers and labour activists in 2007, Samsung Electronics, the leading manufacturer of semi-conductors in the country, issued an apology to its workers in 2018 and agreed to pay compensation of \$133,000 per case for failing to "properly manage health risks at our semiconductor and LCD factories". The company did not acknowledge a link between the materials used in chip manufacturing and the adverse health effects workers faced.

## Transparency and accountability

It is generally difficult in epidemiological studies to establish unequivocal links between certain chemicals and their effects on humans. What we do have is a history of litigation by workers who have developed occupational diseases, with cases often settled by the companies outside of court without accepting culpability for having caused harm. These present important lessons for countries like India, which are aggressively pursuing a path of rapid growth for the semi-conductor industry. Experience from other countries points to two key issues concerning occupational health in the sector: the lack of information about the use of chemicals in chip manufacturing and the lack of transparency or accountability when it comes to the materials or processes in manufacturing.

The industry has a history of failing to inform workers about the chemicals they are handling or their poten-

tial hazards. Technological advancements have led to new chemicals being introduced in manufacturing without an adequate assessment of their effect on human health. In manufacturing units, workers wear suits that cover their bodies, but these are designed primarily to protect the chips/silicon wafers from contamination, and not the workers from being exposed to toxic chemicals.

Where there have been changes in the use of chemicals or compensation given to workers for adverse health impacts, such as in the US and South Korea, these were the result of sustained campaigns from workers' collectives. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the regulatory agency that governs occupational health in the US, recognises that the permissible limits of several chemicals may not be adequately updated or in line with the rapid changes in the manufacturing process. Most permissible exposure limits were issued when the occupational health law, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, was first introduced, in 1970.

## Lessons for India

The history of health risks in semi-conductor manufacturing poses challenges for India, given the state of its regulatory mechanisms on occupational health and safety. The recently enacted Code on Occupational Health and Safety, 2020, has a schedule of "hazardous" industries that includes the "semi-conductor manufacturing industry." This puts it under the ambit of provisions that require the disclosure of health hazards (s. 84) and the maintenance of health records, as

well as mandatory provision of medical examination for workers (s. 85).

While the inclusion of the industry under the "hazardous" list is welcome – the list had not been updated since 1987, after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy – an alarming omission in the Code is the "permissible threshold limits" of chemicals and toxic substances, which was present in the Second Schedule of the erstwhile Factories Act, 1948. Far from being updated in accordance with what we now know about the use of toxic chemicals in the semi-conductor industry, the Code has completely omitted any specifications on "permissible threshold limits" for any substance, and left it "to be prescribed by the State Government." There is no provision on how the specifications may be updated, or in what manner – by contrast, under the provision in the Factories Act, 1948, the Central Government could make changes in the permissible threshold limits in the Second Schedule on specific proof given by specialised institutions or experts.

In terms of regulatory mechanisms, India does not have a body that works on setting exposure limits, like OSHA does in the US. No institution or regulatory agency is assigned the responsibility of maintaining and developing either toxicology standards or epidemiological studies in occupational health. The Directorate General Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI) acts as a technical body for the formulation of national policy and only occasionally conducts studies on occupational health. The lack of adequate infrastructure (such as laboratories and equipment) and trained professionals who are employed as inspectors has been a longstanding issue in occupational health and safety.

Inspection rates have shown a steady decline in India, across all labour laws, in major states. The Code introduces an inspection scheme that relies on "web-based inspections," which means that information under the Code can be sought for electronically, and the selection of factories for inspection will be randomized under the scheme. Inspectors can no longer identify and enter factories to conduct an inspection of materials or processes.

Several states in India have already moved on to self-certification mechanisms, or given across-the-board exemptions to factories from any kind

of physical inspection. Previously, there was a statutory requirement to set up a safety committee with worker representation (s. 41 G, Factories Act, 1948), but the Code reduces this to a non-mandatory provision, left to the discretion of the Central or State Government, as the case may be (s. 22).

The projected growth of the semiconductor industry in India is set to take place in a scenario where an already inadequate regulatory mechanism has been further weakened by statutory provisions. Drawing on the experience of workers in the chip-manufacturing industry – across its many relocations—helps us understand that the push should be for "good jobs" that do not put workers at risk. This involves not only technical expertise and robust reporting requirements, but also a general framework that is worker-centred, gives them decision-making powers over their own health, and enables their concerns to be taken seriously.

While India's decision to categorise "semi-conductor manufacturing" as a "hazardous" industry implicitly acknowledges the dangers, its occupational health and safety regulations for manufacturing are outdated, with reporting mechanisms ineffective in building a database for harmful chemicals and processes. Because we know so little about the use of chemicals in the industry, coming up with adequate prescriptions for exposure limits will be difficult in the absence of reliable data.

At the very least, the semi-conductor industry should not be allowed to use chemicals in manufacturing that have not been tested beforehand for their effects on human health. Workers should be allowed to remove themselves from a situation that poses "imminent and serious danger" to their health, (in accordance with ILO Convention no. 155, on Occupational Health and Safety). Occupational health and safety regulations for the industry need to keep up with the rapid changes in the technology, materials, and processes involved. Such mechanisms need to be not only technically sound, but responsive to workers' concerns as they emerge. The government should redirect funding to improving the domestic infrastructure on occupational health and safety so that experts and institutions are able to adequately keep regulations on track with advancements in technology. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

## Can INDIA bloc resolve its leadership disputes and put to rest its internal strife

By: K S Tomar

The INDIA bloc, a coalition of 26 ideologically diverse parties, was created to counter the BJP's electoral dominance. In the 2024 general elections, the bloc achieved a significant milestone, reducing the BJP's tally to below 240 seats. However, this success has been tempered by internal discord, which now threatens the alliance's fragile unity.

A key figure in this unfolding drama is Mamata Banerjee, the dynamic leader of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Her aspirations for leadership within the coalition have both galvanised and fractured its members. Mamata Banerjee's National Ambitions Mamata Banerjee's bid for prominence within the INDIA bloc stems from her desire to extend her influence beyond West Bengal and play a decisive role in shaping national politics. Her assertive style has invigorated some allies but has alienated others, exposing the persistent challenge of reconciling regional ambitions with a unified national strategy. Earlier, Banerjee proposed Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge as the bloc's chairperson, a strategic move to diminish the influence of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, one of the coalition's key architects.

This proposal, supported by leaders like Akhilesh Yadav and Arvind Kejriwal, showcased Banerjee's ability to consolidate support. However, her growing clout has sparked unease among other leaders. For instance, Lalu Prasad Yadav, a staunch Congress ally, appears to be rethinking his loyalties. Such dynamics highlight the alliance's precarious balance and the potential for further fractures.

Lessons from the Past: UPA2 The INDIA bloc's current challenges echo the struggles faced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA2) during its tenure. In 2012, Mamata Banerjee's dramatic exit from the UPA over policy disagreements underscored the inherent instability of coalition politics. Scandals and policy paralysis plagued UPA2, eroding its



credibility and paving the way for Narendra Modi's rise.

As Banerjee's ambitions take center stage, the INDIA bloc risks repeating history. If it fails to address its internal contradictions, it could suffer the same fate as UPA2, jeopardising its ability to present a united front against the BJP. BJP's Advantage Amid Opposition Discord The BJP stands to benefit from the INDIA bloc's internal strife. While Banerjee wields considerable influence in West Bengal, Congress retains a broader national presence. A fragmented opposition could split anti-BJP votes, a scenario that would play into the saffron party's hands. Recent BJP gains in Maharashtra and Haryana underscore the bloc's challenges, particularly for Congress, which has struggled to maintain dominance in key states. Seat-sharing disputes within the bloc further illustrate its lack of strategic coherence.

For instance, the Aam Aadmi Party's unilateral candidate announcements in Delhi and Haryana have fueled tensions, revealing the alliance's inability to present a united strategy.

Mamata vs Congress: Mamata Banerjee's leadership ambitions pose a paradox for Congress. Her energy and charisma could revitalise the bloc, but her assertiveness risks overshadowing Congress's central role. This tension is particularly pronounced in states like West Bengal and Kerala, where Congress directly competes with the TMC and the Left. Seat-sharing negotiations in overlapping constituencies could exacerbate divisions, straining the alliance further.

For Congress, retaining relevance within the INDIA bloc will require a delicate balancing act: accommodating Banerjee's influence without compromising its identity. Key Challenges for the INDIA Bloc The alliance faces several hurdles that could determine its survival:

Leadership Struggles: The lack of consensus on a prime ministerial candidate risks deepening divisions.

Unified Campaign Narrative: A focus on governance, economic policies, and social justice can resonate with voters more effectively than personal rivalries.

Effective Coordination: Mechanisms for conflict resolution and decision-making must be strengthened. Balancing Regional and National Goals: Respecting regional aspirations while pursuing a cohesive national agenda is critical.

A Test of Political Maturity: Mamata Banerjee's ambitions underscore her political acumen and the complexities of coalition politics. While her leadership could energise the INDIA bloc, it also risks deepening divisions. Navigating this intricate web of regional and national aspirations will test the bloc's political maturity.

The upcoming state elections and the 2029 general elections will be pivotal in determining whether the INDIA bloc can overcome its internal strife and emerge as a credible alternative to the BJP. Resolving leadership disputes, crafting a compelling narrative, and presenting a unified front are critical to its success. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

## Following Afghanistan, Syria cements the end of America's 'War on Terror' era

By: Kabir Taneja

Syria's new de-facto leader, Ahmed al-Shara (better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani) of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militia, formerly aligned with both al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State, has said that the country is "tired of wars" and now wants to build a state and institutions away from conflict. This clarion call of exhaustion with a war running for over 13 years will resonate loudly in Washington D.C., where a similar mood has taken over after more than two decades of leading the 'War on Terror' charge that redefined the post 9/11 security order.

However, the current reality of Syria represents a transition to a new global security order as the previous era is filed under a chapter of history with mixed results. The ouster of Bashar al-Assad's reign in Damascus is unearthing the many horrors of how the previous regime maintained its control over the decades. While the Syrian people celebrate this change in leadership, the rebels in charge who represent the new reality that has replaced the old open up a whole new Pandora's box both regionally and globally.

In 2021, the messy United States' (US) withdrawal from Afghanistan left behind a new political reality run by the Taliban and its extremist ideology. While the Biden administration bore the impact of the chaos that ensued in Kabul after the withdrawal, it was the deal signed by President Donald Trump with the Taliban in Qatar during his first term that ultimately led to the withdrawal. The deal was led by an American public discourse of exhaustion, turbocharged by Trump's insular brand of politics. The 'America First' adage reoriented the 'War on Terror' albeit in a hasty manner.

Jolani's juggernaut in Syria has been met with more acceptance than caution. Even the Syrian embassy in Washington D.C. has reportedly changed the flag to that of the 'revolution'. Dozens of countries have already made diplomatic contact with Jolani and his Syrian Salvation government, and many embassies in the country, including India's, remain operational. The US has also moved forward to make diplomatic contact, a decision which cannot be under-emphasised. Having fought jihadists for a better part of the past 20 years, the US is now accepting the realities of the same jihadists running their states. Arab monarchies such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have institutionally pushed back against radicalism and extremist ideologies such as the Muslim Brotherhood, are demanding caution, while the likes of Türkiye's intelligence chief, having supported sections of the rebels, landed in Damascus and prayed at the symbolic Umayyad Mosque within hours of Assad's ousting.

These rapid changes taking place are not directly tied to American power. The US' power, or its intent to exercise the same on



a global scale, is not yet on the decline either financially or by way of resources and military strength. It is the political will and the domestic demands and realities that have shifted. Geopolitics have also shifted with the re-emergence of a big power competition, which is in the driving seat of many of the ongoing changes. "There's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the US to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan," now outgoing US President Joe Biden said in 2021.

If someone like Jolani can help push back Iran and Russia from Syria, which, by his admission, he intends to do, it works in the West's favour in the short term. A potential withdrawal of Russia from its only two military bases in the Middle East on the coast of Syria would be welcomed. Iran's surprise at the failure of its multi-layered interventions in Syria seems to have opened many domestic conversations about the country's role in the region and the realities of its polity and economy. If an alternative to Assad in Syria can result in both Russia and Iran's exit from the country, manage any potential refugee influx into Europe (which previously led to a re-ordering of the continent's politics towards the right), and implement a degree of ideologically moderate stability, irrespective of being democratic or autocratic, then in the short-term at least, this alternative is palatable to the US. It represents the return of a troubled dichotomy from the past, the difficulty in differentiating between a 'good' and a 'bad' terrorist.

In Afghanistan, many ideated and wished for a 'Taliban 2.0', that is, a pragmatic take on the Deobandi group away from its two-decade long war against the US. The similarities are not just uncanny but represent a blueprint of sorts—a status quo where the ji-

hadist groups and (The US continues its anti-ISIS operations in Syria. At some point in the past decade, many of these rebel groups in Syria were allies in their fight against ISIS, keeping aside their differences. Even in Afghanistan, the Taliban is increasingly being seen on the frontlines in the fight against the Islamic State Khorasan (or ISIS-K), Daesh's growing branch in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This is even though the Taliban domestically continues a struggle amongst its ranks after the first few months of showcasing unity. The recent assassination of Khalil Haqqani, Sirajuddin's uncle and brother of the Haqqani network's founder Jalaluddin Haqqani, inside a secure government building highlights the opacity of militant groups trying to run states.

In 2019, Trump's former Defence Secretary, Jim Mattis, made a pertinent observation that, in any war, the enemy gets a vote deciding if it is truly over or not. Between 2001 and 2021, the Taliban exercised that power till the US politically capitulated. The story of Syria under Jolani is too new, too optimistic, and too aligned with people's current and prevailing sentiment of relief to draw long-term conclusions. However, it may well be geopolitics, regional and international power struggles, and not counterterrorism, that may shape Syria's future once again. Their leadership are left to their own devices in exchange for security and political guarantees. Both Jolani and the Taliban's powerful Interim Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, carry US\$ 10 million bounties to this day. Ironically, the bounty documents say the prize is available to anyone who knows their whereabouts or has information on them, even as both Jolani and Haqqani appear on television every day and meet politicians and diplomats, engaging with civil society. (Courtesy: ORF)

# Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's rebel-held capital and port city after Houthi attack targets Israel

*'Whoever raises a hand against Israel, his hand will be cut off'*

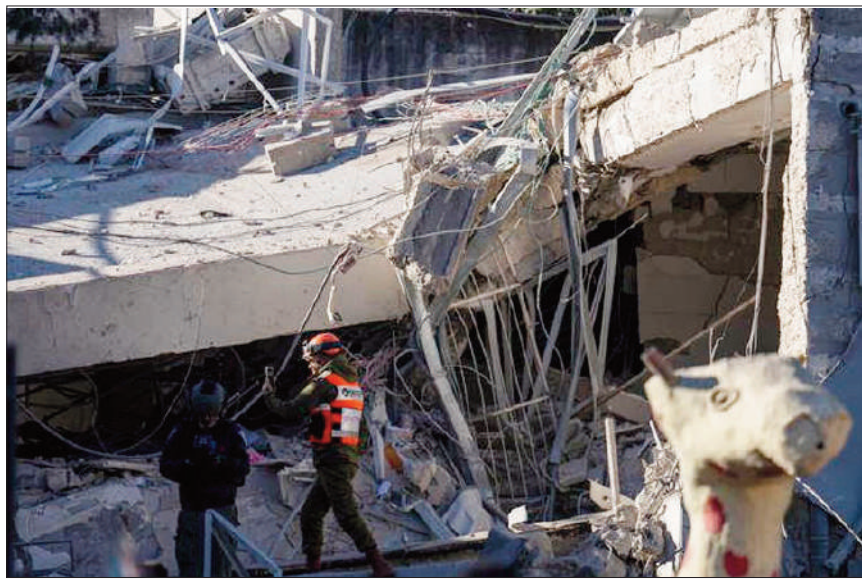
**DUBAI, Dec 19:** A series of intense Israeli airstrikes shook Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city early Thursday and killed at least nine people, officials said, shortly after a Houthi missile targeted central Israel.

Thursday's strikes risk further escalating conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthis, whose attacks on the Red Sea corridor have drastically impacted global shipping. The rebels have so far avoided the same level of intense military strikes that have targeted Palestinian militant group Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, fellow members of Tehran's self-described "Axis of Resistance."

Israel's military said that it conducted two waves of strikes in a preplanned operation that began early Thursday and involved 14 fighter jets. The military said the first wave of strikes targeted Houthi infrastructure at the ports of Hodeida, Salif and the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea.

Then, in a second wave of strikes, the military said its fighter jets targeted Houthi energy infrastructure in Sanaa. The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masrah said that some of the strikes targeted power stations in the capital, posting videos of flames engulfing one structure, as civil defense workers doused it in water, trying to extinguish the fire.

The channel, citing its correspondent in the port city of Hodeida, said that at least seven people had been killed at Salif, while another two had been killed at the Ras Isa oil terminal. Others suffered wounds at the



Hodeida port as well, it said.

Rear Adm Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman, said the strikes hit energy and port infrastructure, which he alleged the rebels "have been using in ways that effectively contributed to their military action."

"I suggest the leaders of the Houthis to see, to understand and remember: Whoever raises a hand against the state of Israel, his hand will be cut off, whoever harms us — will be harmed sevenfold," Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said.

Rebel-held Hodeida, about 145 kilometres southwest of Sanaa, has been key for food shipments into Yemen as its decade-long war has gone on. There's also longstanding suspicion that weapons from Iran have been transferred through the port.

The strikes happened just after Israel's military said that its air force intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it entered the country's territory. The waves of strikes on Yemen early Thursday weren't a direct response to the missile hit, said a mil-

itary official, but rather a preplanned response to months of Houthi aggression. Israel's fighter jets were already in the air when the missile was launched.

"Rocket and missile sirens were sounded following the possibility of falling debris from the interception," the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded near Tel Aviv and the surrounding areas, and a large explosion was heard overhead at the time.

In Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, a large piece of shrapnel from the missile collapsed a school building there, without causing any injuries.

The military official said that the Houthis have fired more than 200 missiles and UAVs, or unmanned aerial vehicles, at Israel since October 7, 2023.

Brig Gen Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack hours later in a prerecorded video statement, saying the rebels fired two of its "Palestine" ballistic missiles at Israel.

Israel previously struck Hodeida and its oil infrastructure in July after a Houthi drone attack killed one person and wounded 10 in Tel Aviv. In September, Israel struck Hodeida again, killing at least four people after a rebel missile targeted Israel's Ben Gurion airport as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was arriving back to the country.

American forces have also launched a series of strikes on the Houthis over nearly a year because of Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea corridor. (AP)

# 'Unfortunate and biased': Pakistan on US sanction



**ISLAMABAD, Dec 19:** Pakistan on Thursday termed as "unfortunate and biased" the US decision to sanction its commercial entities for alleged involvement in ballistic missile programme.

After the US designated its four entities for sanctions, a statement from the Foreign Office (FO) stated that the sanction defies the objective of peace and security by aiming to accentuate military asymmetries and claimed that "double standards and discriminatory practices undermine the credibility of non-proliferation regimes."

In light of the alleged continuing proliferation threat of Pakistan's long-range missile development, the United States on Wednesday designated four entities for sanctions which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, the State Department said.

These include the state-owned Islamabad-based flagship aerospace and defence agency National Development Complex (NDC), and three Karachi-based entities, Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise.

"Pakistan considers the US decision to impose sanctions on NDC and three commercial entities as unfortunate and biased," FO said, adding that Pakistan's strategic capabilities are meant to defend its sovereignty and preserve peace and stability in South Asia.

"The latest installment of sanctions defies the objective of peace and security by aiming to accentuate military asymmetries. Such policies have dangerous implications for strategic stability of our region and beyond."

FO declared that Pakistan's

strategic programme is a sacred trust bestowed by 240 million people upon its leadership and the sanctity of this trust, has been held in the highest esteem across the entire political spectrum, cannot be compromised.

"We also regret the imposition of sanctions on private commercial entities. Similar listings of commercial entities in the past were based on mere doubts and suspicion without any evidence whatsoever," FO said.

It maintained that while claiming strict adherence to non-proliferation norms, licensing requirements for advanced military technology to other countries have been waived off in the past.

"Such double standards and discriminatory practices not only undermine the credibility of non-proliferation regimes but also endanger regional and international peace and security," FO concluded.

Earlier US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement that in light of the continuing proliferation threat of Pakistan's long-range missile development, "the United States is designating four entities for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13382, which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery."

According to the State Department, the NDC is responsible for Pakistan's ballistic missile programme and has worked to acquire items to advance Pakistan's long range ballistic missile programme, while the other three have worked to supply equipment and missile-applicable items to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme, including its long range missile programme. (PTI)

## South Korea's acting leader vetoes opposition-sponsored bills, deepening political strife



**SEOUL, Dec 19:** South Korea's acting leader on Thursday vetoed a spate of contentious bills sponsored by the main opposition party, deepening political strife in the wake of parliament's impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol.

The ruling and opposition parties have been bickering over how much authority Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the country's No. 2 official, has assumed since the opposition-controlled National Assembly last Saturday voted to suspend Yoon's presidential powers over his short-lived Dec 3 martial law. The Constitutional Court is to determine whether to formally dismiss the conservative Yoon as president or reinstate him.

Law enforcement authorities are also separately investigating whether Yoon's martial law enforcement amounted to rebellion. Yoon's defence minister, police chief and several other military commanders have already been arrested over the case. The main liberal opposition Democratic Party earlier considered impeaching Han as well for failing to stop Yoon's martial law declaration, but shelved the idea after he became acting leader.

Four of the six bills vetoed by Han were meant to introduce greater state financial assistance programmes for the country's agriculture and fisheries industries. The most contentious bill is the Grain Management Act, which would require the government to buy surplus rice if the price drops too sharply to protect the country's farming industry and promote its food sovereignty. Han said the bill would cause "immense" financial burdens on the government and eventually lead to further drops in rice prices.

Another controversial bill is the National Assembly Testimony Appraisal Act, which would give lawmakers more power to request people to attend parliament hearings and submit documents. Under the proposed legislation, individuals could no longer decline such requests by citing the protection of trade secrets or personal information.

The Democratic Party said the bill is necessary to determine the full details of Yoon's martial law decree. But Han said the bill would likely infringe upon people's privacy and that there are concerns among business leaders that key technology and company secrets could be leaked.

"I'm heavy-hearted because I've asked the National Assembly to discuss and act on the six bills again at a time when we desperately need

cooperation among the government and the ruling and opposition parties," Han said in televised comments at the start of a Cabinet Council meeting on Thursday. "But the government should make a responsible decision that prioritises the principles of the Constitution and the future of our country."

Democratic lawmaker and spokesperson Noh Jongmyun quickly criticized Han, warning him "not to cross a line," adding, "We'll immediately drag him down if he's found to have collaborated with the rebellion."

Han's office later sent formal documents on his vetoes to the National Assembly. To enact a bill vetoed by a president, the parliament needs support from two-thirds of its 300 lawmakers. The Democratic Party and other small opposition parties together hold 192 seats.

Observers earlier speculated the Democratic Party would reconsider impeaching Han if he vetoed the bills.

Another source of contention between the rival parties is whether Han has the right to appoint three vacant justices' seats at the Constitutional Court, as filling the vacancies could affect the court's decision on Yoon.

The martial law enactment lasted only six hours, but it caused huge political turmoil in South Korea and set off alarms from its neighbours and diplomatic partners. Yoon sent hundreds of troops and police officers to the National Assembly to block its vote on his decree. But many lawmakers managed to enter a parliament hall and unanimously voted it down, forcing Yoon's Cabinet to lift it.

Yoon has defended his decree as an act of governance, saying it was a warning to the Democratic Party, which he said has been using its parliamentary majority to obstruct his agenda.

Meeting with foreign media on Thursday, Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer and spokesperson for Yoon's emerging legal team, echoed Yoon's assertion that his short-lived power grab didn't amount to a rebellion. Seok said Yoon did not intend to paralyse the parliament and denied claims the president ordered the military to arrest his political opponents, including Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung.

"Regarding the charges of rebellion, he never even thought about it, so he cannot possibly agree to such an accusation," Seok said.

"What kind of a rebellion is announced through a press conference broadcast to citizens, media and the whole world, as if he was saying, 'I'm now about to commit a rebellion?'" Seok said. "When the National Assembly followed the constitutional procedure to lift martial law after two or three hours, we abided by that procedure."

He said Yoon may appear in the Constitutional Court to directly defend his case. When asked whether Yoon would continue to ignore law enforcement's requests to question him and search his office, Seok declined to give a specific answer, saying these matters would be handled by Yoon's legal team, which he said is nearly assembled. (AP)

## French president arrives in Mayotte to survey Cyclone Chido damage

**MAMOUZOU, Dec 19:** France's President Emmanuel Macron arrived Thursday to the Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte to survey the devastation that Cyclone Chido wrought across the French territory as thousands of people tried cope without the bare essentials such as water or electricity.

"Mayotte is demolished," an airport security agent told Macron as soon as he stepped off the plane.

The security agent, Assane Haloi, said small children are without water or electricity and have nowhere to go because "everything is demolished."

"There's no roof, there's nothing. No water, no food, no electricity. We can't even shelter, we are all wet with our children covering our-

selves with whatever we have so that we can sleep," she said, asking for emergency aid.

Macron went on an helicopter for an aerial appraisal of the damage. He then headed to the hospital in Mamouzou, Mayotte's capital, to meet with medical staff and patients. He will then visit a destroyed neighbourhood. French authorities said at least 31 people have died and more than 1,500 people were injured, more than 200 critically.

But it's feared hundreds or even thousands of people have died after the strongest cyclone in nearly a century ripped through the French territory of Mayotte off the coast of Africa on Saturday.

Ahamadi Mohammed said Macron's visit "is a good thing be-

cause he'll be able to see by himself the damage".

"I think that we'll then get significant aid to try and get the island back on its feet," the 58-year-old said. A navy ship was due to arrive in Mayotte on Thursday with 180 tons of aid and equipment, according to the French military.

People living in a large slum on the outskirts of Mamouzou were some of the hardest hit from the cyclone. Many had lost their houses, some had lost friends.

Nassirou Hamidouni sheltered in his house when the cyclone hit.

His neighbour was killed when his house collapsed on him and his six children. Hamidouni and others dug through the rubble to reach them. (AP)

## Putin opens his annual news conference, an event he uses to reinforce his authority

**MOSCOW, Dec 19:** Russian President Vladimir Putin boasted about the economy and hailed his troops' gains in Ukraine during his annual news conference and call-in show Thursday, an event he uses to reinforce his authority and demonstrate sweeping control of the country's political scene. Putin began the tightly choreographed session by saying that Russia's economy is on track to grow by nearly 4 per cent this year. He acknowledged that consumer prices are high, with inflation at 9.3 per cent, but insisted that the economic situation remains "stable." Putin, who has held power for nearly a quarter-century, also said the military was "advancing toward achieving our goals" in what he calls the special military operation in Ukraine, where his forces have made slow but steady gains. "The situation is changing radically, we are advancing along the entire front line," he said, asking people in the audience to unfurl a banner presented to him by marines fighting the Ukrainian forces that launched an incursion into Russia's Kursk region.

That incursion has proved a major embarrassment for the Kremlin. Asked when Russian troops will drive Ukrainian forces out, Putin responded that "we will certainly kick them out" but wouldn't say how long it will take. In response to a question about a new hypersonic intermediate-range ballistic missile that Russia used for the first time last month to strike Ukraine, Putin scoffed at claims by some Western experts that it could be intercepted by NATO's air defences.

He mockingly challenged Ukraine's Western allies to a "high-tech duel," suggesting that Moscow could give advance notice of a strike on Kyiv with the Oreshnik missile — and see if the West could protect the city. "Let's see what happens," he added with a smile. Putin has said Russia's use of the Oreshnik was a response to the West granting permission for Kyiv to use their longer-range weapons for strikes on Russia. He threatened that Moscow could launch more strikes on Ukraine with the missile and warned it could also be used to target military facilities of the countries that allowed Ukraine to use their missiles for attacks deep into Russia. (AP)

## Indian, US officials meet to chart next steps in space collaboration

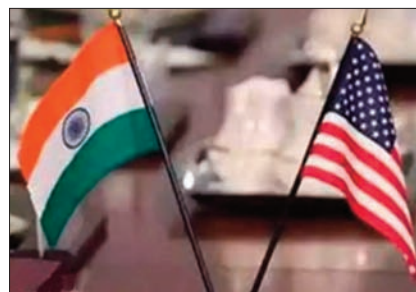
*They agreed to exploring the creation of a new space innovation bridge*

**WASHINGTON, Dec 19:** Officials from India and the United States have charted next steps in space collaboration, including human spaceflight, joint space exploration and a commitment to facilitating commercial partnerships between space companies to advance the shared interests in the growing space economy, the White House said on Wednesday.

A meeting in this regard was held in Houston on December 17. The participants in the meeting were US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Indian Ambassador to the United States Vinay Kwatra.

"Following President (Joe) Biden and Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi's June 2023 commitment to work together to 'reach new frontiers across all sectors of space cooperation' and India's signing of the Artemis Accords, our two nations reached an inflection point on collaboration across civil, security and commercial space sectors," the White House said in a fact-sheet.

"This includes human spaceflight, joint



space exploration and a commitment to facilitating commercial partnerships between US and Indian space companies to advance our shared interests in the growing space economy," it said.

As part of their visit to Houston, Finer and Campbell met with representatives from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and space industry leaders to identify new opportunities to further strengthen the two countries' burgeoning space partnership.

They also reflected on the accomplish-

ments of the past few months and charted next steps to take the India-US partnership to the next level, including selecting two ISRO astronauts to train at the NASA's Johnson Space Centre for the first-ever joint effort between American and Indian astronauts at the International Space Station, with Axiom Space serving as the provider of the mission. The launch of the Axiom-4 mission as soon as spring 2025 will mark a significant milestone in the US-India space partnership and space exploration.

They agreed to exploring the creation of a new space innovation bridge to promote partnerships between US and Indian startups focused on advancing space situational awareness, satellite technology and space launch and exploration.

The two sides agreed to promote defence space cooperation through the US-India Advanced Domains Defence Dialogue, India's participation in US Space Command's annual Global Sentinel exercise and a recently-launched space situational awareness joint challenge under the India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X).

judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit", Rana has argued that he was tried and acquitted in the federal court in the Northern District of Illinois (Chicago) on charges relating to the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai. "India now seeks to extradite him for trial on charges based on the identical conduct at issue in the Chicago case," the plea has said.

"The government does not concede that all of the conduct on which India seeks extradition was covered by the government's prosecution in this case. For example, India's forgery charges are based in part on conduct that was not charged in the United States; petitioner's use of false information in an application to formally open a branch office of the Immigration Law Centre submitted to the Reserve Bank of India," the US solicitor general said.

"It is not clear that the jury's verdict in this case -- which involves conspiracy charges and was somewhat difficult to parse -- means that he has been 'convicted or acquitted' on all of the specific conduct that India has charged," Prelogar said.

A total of 166 people, including six Americans, were killed in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which 10 Pakistani terrorists laid a more than 60-hour siege, attacking and killing people at iconic and vital locations of Mumbai. (PTI)

The officials agreed to advance reviews of missile technology exports to generate new opportunities for bilateral industry partnerships on space-launch technology, including for commercial satellite launches. They also celebrated the completion of a Strategic Framework for Human Spaceflight Cooperation to deepen interoperability in space and working toward the conclusion of a new arrangement on advanced astronaut training.

The officials also met with two ISRO astronauts who are training at the NASA's Johnson Space Centre in preparation to join a proposed mission -- the International Space Station -- in 2025.

They also discussed plans to launch a jointly developed NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar Earth Science (NISAR) satellite in 2025. The officials met with representatives from the space industry private sector to explore innovative ways for the US and Indian commercial space sectors to strengthen collaboration, a key priority under the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), the State Department said in a separate media release. (PTI)

## Two arrested with cannabis worth ₹ 25 lakh

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, Dec 19: Tripura Police apprehended two individuals and confiscated cannabis valued at ₹ 25 lakh on Thursday morning in Ambassa, located in the Dhalai district.

Officer-in-Charge of Ambassa Police Station, Nandan Das informed reporters that the operation was based on a tip-off regarding a Bolero passenger vehicle, transporting a significant quantity of cannabis from Agartala to Dharmanagar in the North District.

"Acting on the information, we alerted our personnel stationed at the Naka check posts. At around 10 am, the suspected vehicle was intercepted.

Upon conducting a thorough search, we uncovered 20 packets of cannabis weighing 189 kilograms concealed in a secret compartment. Both the driver and his assistant were arrested," said Das.

The arrested individuals were identified as Samir Rabi Das, the driver, and his assistant Joydip Chowdhury, both hailing from Sepahijala district.

## Amid protests, Arunachal Dy CM defends Siang hydro project

National Hydro Electric Power Corporation (NHPC) proposed three sites in Upper Siang and Siang districts for the construction of the dam

ITANAGAR, Dec 19: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein on Thursday asserted that the deployment of security forces in Siang and Upper Siang districts is to protect machinery and personnel involved in the survey operations for the proposed Siang Multipurpose Hydroproject and not to intimidate or harm residents.

Mein's remarks came when a section of the local people opposed the project. They expressed concern over the deployment of the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) and the potential environmental and social impact of the dam.

Addressing a public meeting at Boleng general ground in Siang district, Mein sought to quell fears of the people protesting the survey and pre-feasibility report (PFR) for the project.

"We are not anti-people, nor are we anti-Arunachal," he said, urging the community to support the initiative.

He emphasized that the pres-



ence of CAPF personnel in the area was just precautionary, ensuring the safety of operations.

Mein outlined the multifaceted benefits of the project, describing it as a pivotal undertaking for the development of Arunachal Pradesh.

"The Siang Dam is not just a project; it is an opportunity to secure the future of our youth, generate significant revenue, and bring prosperity to Arunachal," he said.

The dam would help solve problems of water storage, irrigation, industrial supply, flood control, power generation, navigation, runoff storage, and water discharge regulation, the deputy CM said.

Clarifying discrepancies in capacity reports, Mein noted that the dam's output is 11,000 megawatts, contrary to reports suggesting 12,500 megawatts.

He also highlighted the dam's strategic importance in mitigating

risks posed by China's 60,000 MW dam on the Tsangpo River. "If China releases water from their dam, the entire Pasighat town could be submerged. The Siang Dam will act as a safeguard, mitigating such risks while enhancing national security," he said.

Mein appealed to the community to consider the broader implications of the project.

"This is a step towards progress and a secure future for Arunachal," he said, urging residents to engage in constructive dialogue.

The National Hydro Electric Power Corporation (NHPC) has proposed three sites in Upper Siang and Siang districts for the construction of the dam.

One site is between Parong and Deking villages, one at Ugeng near Riga village and another between Ditte-Dime and Geku, officials said.

The NHPC has been conducting surveys at the proposed sites to prepare a feasibility report for the project, they said. (PTI)

## Manipur Cong protests Amit Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

IMPHAL, Dec 19: The opposition Congress in Manipur held a demonstration in state capital Imphal on Thursday, alleging that Union Home Minister Amit Shah insulted BR Ambedkar in Parliament.

With placards and banners, the Congress workers raised slogans against Shah during the demonstration in front of Kangla Fort.

State Congress president Keisham Meghachandra said, "We strongly condemn the insulting remarks to Ambedkar who is the father of the Constitution. Shah must apologise to the nation or he must resign. He has insulted the Constitution in Parliament."

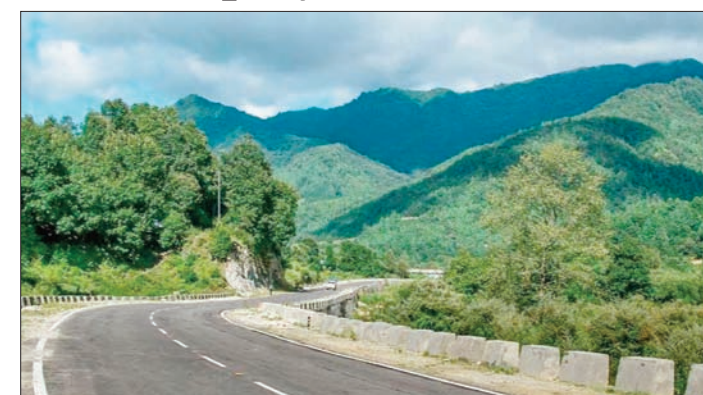
He also demanded an investigation into the alleged "assault" of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge in Parliament.

Earlier in the day, a face-off between the opposition and NDA MPs in Parliament premises over the alleged insult to Ambedkar injured former minister Pratap Chandra Sarangi.

The BJP accused Rahul Gandhi of pushing the senior member, a charge the Congress leader rejected.

The Congress also claimed that BJP MPs pushed Kharge and "physically manhandled" the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha. (PTI)

## Centre allocates ₹ 398 crore for road projects in Arunachal



ITANAGAR, Dec 19: The Union government has allocated ₹ 398 crore for 19 road development projects in Arunachal Pradesh for 2024-25 fiscal.

Announcing it on Tuesday, Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari said the projects under the Central Road and Infrastructure Fund (CRIF) aim to improve last-mile connectivity in the border areas of the northeastern state, facilitating seamless access and promoting socio-economic development in remote regions.

"The investment underscores our commitment to strengthening infrastructure in remote areas, driving regional development, and improving livelihoods in the

North-East region," the Union minister said in a social media post.

Gadkari also informed that a total of 190 projects, spanning a length of 3,856 km and costing ₹ 81,540 crore, are under construction across the North-East. All these projects are scheduled or revised to be completed by September 2028, he added.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu expressed gratitude to Gadkari and the central government for the allocation, describing the initiative as transformative. "This investment will enhance last-mile connectivity, boost socio-economic growth, and uplift livelihoods in remote areas," Khandu said in a post on X. (PTI)

## NEC 72nd Plenary: Tripura ramps up security with over 10,000 personnel, says DGP



HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, Dec 19: In preparation for the 72nd Plenary Session of the North Eastern Council (NEC), Tripura Police have intensified security measures, deploying over 10,000 personnel across the state.

This was confirmed by the Director General of Police (DGP), Amitabh Ranjan, on Thursday.

Scheduled to take place in Agartala from December 20 to 21, the plenary session will witness the presence of Union home minister Amit Shah, Union DoNER Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, and the chief ministers, chief secretaries, and Governors of all northeastern states.

DGP Ranjan, along with top officials including director general (intelligence) Anurag Dhankar, G.S. Rao, additional director general Lalhminga Darlong, inspector general of police (Crime and Intelligence) Ipper Manchakm, and DIG Range Krishnendu Chakraverty, visited the venues on

Thursday to review security arrangements and overall preparedness.

Speaking to reporters, DGP Ranjan emphasized the extensive measures being undertaken. "The NEC Plenary Session will see the arrival of high-profile dignitaries, including Union home minister Amit Shah.

We have made elaborate security arrangements covering the India-Bangladesh border, city areas, and critical venues. Preventive actions, naka patrolling, and preparedness checks are being rigorously carried out," he said.

He further added that trial runs are in progress to ensure seamless operations. "Out of the 10,000 security forces deployed across the state, over 5,000 personnel have been stationed in and around Agartala city. This includes personnel from the BSF, CRPF, Assam Rifles, and Tripura State Rifles. All police stations and Border Outposts have also been put on high alert," DGP Ranjan informed.

## HM to lay foundation for new Tripura BJP office

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, Dec 19: Union Home Minister Amit Shah is set to visit Agartala to lay the foundation stone and perform the Bhoomi Pujan for the new Tripura BJP state office on December 22.

The event will take place at Natun Nagar, Agartala.

Shah's visit coincides with the 72nd Plenary Session of the North Eastern Council (NEC), scheduled for December 20-21, also being held in Agartala.

Social Welfare and Social Education Minister Tinku Roy, after inspecting the site and preparations, confirmed that the new BJP office will be built on a 1.20-acre plot at Natun Nagar.

"The current office is too small, causing difficulties during meetings and other activities. The new building will resolve these issues and serve as a hub for welfare initiatives and developmental decisions," Roy stated.

The Bhoomi Pujan ceremony will see the presence of prominent leaders, including Tripura chief minister Manik Saha and BJP state President Rajib Bhattacharya, alongside Amit Shah.

## Nagaland favours consultation on oil palm cultivation

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Dec 19: The Nagaland agricultural department endorsed the need for broad-based consultations with stakeholders on oil palm cultivation in the state to ensure transparent public engagement and critical deliberations.

Advisor to agriculture department Mhathung Yanthan issued a press statement in this regard following concerns raised by the Nagaland Community Conserved Areas Forum (NCCAF) and other individuals and organisations on oil palm cultivation in the state recently.

"These concerns can neither be ignored nor oversimplified," he said.

Appreciating their commitment to safeguarding Nagaland's ecological and social integrity, he said their suggestions for fostering a transparent and informed dialogue on the long-term implications of oil palm cultivation were highly valued.



He said the process would address the long-term environmental impacts of not only oil palm cultivation but also other plantation and field crops, including biodiversity conservation and water security.

He informed that the state government through the agriculture department had been promoting palm oil cultivation under the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP), recognising its potential for economic uplift of

## Centre reimposes Protected Area Permit in Manipur

IMPHAL, Dec 19: The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has reimposed the Protected Area Permit in Manipur in view of security concerns arising out of influx from neighbouring countries, a state government statement said.

The statement issued late on Wednesday night said, "With this reimposition, the movement of foreigners visiting Manipur will be closely monitored, and they are required to obtain the necessary Protected Area Permit (PAP) in accordance with the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958.

It said the Centre has reimposed the Protected Area Permit in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. The statement also said that the state government has taken notice of the warning issued by an organisation which asked Chief Minister N Biren Singh not to travel to Senapati district to attend a cultural programme by



passing through Kangpokpi district by road.

It stated "Upon investigation, it has been found that no such organization (Kuki Zo Council) exists in Manipur. The origin and authenticity of this group are highly questionable."

The statement said that police are actively look-

ing into this matter and an FIR will be lodged to ascertain the true nature and intent behind such misleading activities.

The government also advised the people "to exercise caution and not to pay heed to statements or claims from organisations of dubious origins, which have been surfacing recently with the apparent intention of creating confusion and unrest."

It said that the state government is committed to maintaining peace and harmony in the state and advised citizens to remain vigilant and trust only credible sources of information. (PTI)

## Forces bust camps of two banned militant organisations



IMPHAL, Dec 19: Security forces busted camps of two banned militant organisations while conducting search operations in Manipur's Imphal East district, police said on Thursday.

A hideout of the banned Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) at Makou Pourabi in Imphal East district was busted on Wednesday during which one air gun, one mobile handset and one bulletproof helmet were seized, they said.

Another training camp of the proscribed PREPAK also at Makou Pourabi was destroyed on Wednesday.

AGARTALA, Dec 19: BSF Additional Director General (ADG) Ravi Gandhi visited border areas of Tripura's Dhalai and Sepahijala districts to review the security scenario and operational preparedness of the border guarding force.

The BSF ADG who is on a two-day visit to Tripura accompanied by Tripura chief secretary J K Sinha and DGP Amitabh Ranjan visited Ambassa in

day during which one INSAS LMG magazine, bayonet, five wooden dummy guns, two walkie-talkie sets, and cartridges were seized.

Police also arrested nine cadres of the banned militant outfit Kangleipak Communist Party (Peoples' War Group) during the last two days for their involvement in extortion activities.

On Wednesday police arrested two members of KCP (PWG) who were involved in extortion activities from Mantripukhri bazar in Imphal East district and recovered demand letters and cash receipt notes of the outfit from their possession.

Six cadres of the KCP (PWG) organization were arrested from Bijoypur Mamang Leikai and Makha Leikai in Kakching district on Wednesday. On Tuesday, police also arrested one cadre of KCP (PWG) involved in extortion activity from Tangkhul Avenue area in Imphal West district. (PTI)

## Arunachal govt terminates service of officer in APPSC paper leak case

ITANAGAR, Dec 19: The Arunachal Pradesh government terminated the service of a Finance and Accounts Officer (FAO) for his alleged involvement in the question paper leak scam in the APPSC exam held in August 2022, an official statement said on Thursday.

Governor KT Parnaik in a recent order dismissed FAO Gomo Sora, posted in the office of deputy commissioner at Yupia, with immediate effect, it said.

Disciplinary proceedings were initiated against him for his misconduct in the paper leak scam, it said.

It was found that "he has committed grave misconduct which has shaken the trust and confidence in the fairness and transparency in the process of public recruitment", the order said.

"It was highly unbecoming of a



public servant and such person should not be allowed to continue in the job under the state government," it added.

The question paper leak incident in the assistant engineer (civil) exam, conducted by the Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Commission (APPSC), came to light when

a candidate filed a police complaint.

Ten people, including APPSC deputy secretary-cum-deputy controller of examination, were arrested by the police for their alleged involvement in the case, the investigation of which was handed to the CBI. (PTI)

## BSF ADG visits border areas of Tripura Myanmarese prisoners escape

Dhalai district and one border outpost (BOP) in Sepahijala district on Wednesday, according to a press release.

Gandhi discussed issues pertaining to effective border management including intense domination of border, joint operation with police and other intelligence to prevent trans border crime, action against touts facilitating illegal

migration, with state government officials and police, the release said.

He also called on Tripura Governor Indrasena Reddy Nallu at Raj Bhavan here on Wednesday, the release said.

The BSF ADG briefed the governor about the prevailing security scenario along the Indo-Bangla border border and operational preparedness of the border guards, it said. (PTI)

AIZAWL, Dec 19: Two Myanmarese prisoners escaped from a jail in east Mizoram's Champhai district, police said on Thursday. The two women, identified as Vansuveni alias Stuin-unfeli (36) of Tahan in Kalaymyo of Sanganu division in Myanmar and Lalchhanmawii (44) of Khawmawii village in Chin state, escaped from the prison's toilet, which was made of tin sheets, they said.

A case was registered at the Champhai police station, and a search was underway for them, they added. They were undergoing trial in drug trafficking cases, police said. (PTI)

## Tripura begins month-long paddy procurement process



AGARTALA, Dec 19: Tripura Food and Civil Supplies Minister Sushanta Chowdhury and Agriculture Minister Ratan Lal Nath on Thursday jointly commenced the paddy procurement process from Madhabari in West Tripura district, which will continue for a month. The government has set a target to procure 21,000 MT paddy directly from the farmers at a minimum support price of ₹ 23 per kg in 51 centres during this season. Last year, the MSP was ₹ 21.83 per kg.

"Since the BJP came to power in Tripura, we have started paddy procurement directly from the farmers to boost the rural economy. The erstwhile regime could not do it for the welfare of the farmers who are largely

marginalised," Chowdhury said.

According to him, the government has spent ₹ 397 crore so far for procuring paddy since 2018 and 1,07,000 farmers received the money.

"We have set a target of procuring 21,000 MT paddy this season and hope the farmers will meet the target despite floods in September," he said.

Chowdhury also highlighted the benefit of the PM-Kisan scheme launched by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to support the farmers. Under the scheme, each enlisted farmer gets annually ₹ 6,000 in three installments.

The agriculture minister called upon the farmers not to leave an inch of land out of farming in view of the constraint in cultivable land in the northeastern state.

"Driven by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission to double the income of farmers, the state government has been extending full support to farmers to make them self-reliant. Since we have a cultivable land constraint, the farmers must use each inch of land for their betterment," Nath said. Claiming that the monthly income of farmers in the state has increased from ₹ 6,580 in 2018 to ₹ 13,590 during 2023, the agriculture minister assured them that those who had suffered in the unprecedented flood in September would get financial assistance for the loss. (PTI)

## Cong always hated Ambedkar, included his shameful cartoon in NCERT book in 2012: Pradhan



**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan Thursday slammed the Congress, alleging it has always hated BR Ambedkar and had even included a cartoon in an NCERT textbook showing Jawaharlal Nehru "whipping" Ambedkar.

He claimed that the "crocodile tears" of the Congress over Ambedkar are just pretence. "Suddenly the Congress has got a lot of respect for Babasaheb Ambedkar. These crocodile tears of the Congress for Babasaheb are just a pretence, there is a huge difference between their words and actions. The Congress party's hatred and contempt for Babasaheb is well known," Pradhan wrote in a post on X.

The Union Education Minister said that during the rule of the Congress-led UPA-2 government, a shameful cartoon was included in the NCERT textbook for Class 11 in 2012 in which Pandit Nehru was shown "whipping" Babasaheb Ambedkar.

"After strong opposition from BJP, then Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal apologised and announced to withdraw it.

"Obviously, such a shameful act cannot happen unknowingly, this cartoon filled with hatred towards Babasaheb was made public only after the approval of the royal family and the whole country

knows who had control of the remote-run government at that time," Pradhan said.

The Union education minister said, "These corrupt people who give themselves 'Bharat Ratna' have never given proper respect to Babasaheb and when the Honorable Prime Minister Modi Ji is giving a grand honour to Babasaheb Ambedkar Ji, the Congress party is unable to digest it."

"The Congress party, which makes political gains in the name of Babasaheb Ambedkar, takes his name only out of compulsion, while the truth is that the entire Congress party, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Rahul Gandhi, has always hated Babasaheb," added Pradhan.

A massive political row erupted on Wednesday as the Congress and other opposition parties launched an all-out attack on Shah for his remarks on Ambedkar and demanded his sacking, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP leaders rallied to his defence and said he has exposed Congress' "anti-Ambedkar" stand.

Competing marches by opposition and NDA MPs over the Ambedkar issue led to shoving and jostling inside Parliament House premises on Thursday with the BJP's Pratap Sarangi getting injured in the melee amid allegations that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi pushed him. (PTI)

## Cong slams BJP's Soros jibe at INDIA bloc's protest against Shah

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** The Congress Thursday slammed the BJP for taking a swipe at the INDIA bloc over its protest against Amit Shah for his Ambedkar remarks, alleging it does not respect the chief architect of the Constitution and wants to diminish his stature for narrow political goals.

The opposition party's attack came over a social media post by the BJP in which it posted a photograph from the INDIA bloc MPs' protest in Parliament on Wednesday against Shah's remarks.

However, the images of Ambedkar that the MPs were holding during the protest were edited out and replaced with a picture of US billionaire George Soros. Also, the backdrop was changed with "We Love Soros" written on it.

"Hello, Congress and INDI alliance. We fixed the image for you. You're welcome," the BJP said in its post.

The BJP has been on the offensive as it has claimed that Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and former Congress president Sonia Gandhi had links with George Soros-backed outfits allegedly involved in anti-India activities.

Sharing the screenshot of the BJP's social media post and also the original photograph from the protest, Congress general secretary in-charge organisation K C Venugopal said, "The BJP is brazen in its insult and ridicule of Dr Ambedkar."

"Instead of ensuring the home minister is removed from his post for the immense hurt caused to the crores of Babasaheb's followers by Amit Shah's statements, they are doubling down on the ridicule."

Is standing up for Ambedkar against the insult to him a matter of joke for the BJP? he posed.

"They are bringing in their rotten falsehoods even on a sensitive matter

like Dr Ambedkar's legacy because they do not respect him and want to diminish his stature for their narrow political goals," Venugopal said in his post on X.

The opposition on Wednesday seized on Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B R Ambedkar to corner the government and demanded his resignation for what they called was an insult to the architect of the Constitution.

The attack from virtually all opposition parties, including the Congress, TMC, DMK, RJD, Left parties and Shiv Sena-UBT, led to the adjournment of both Houses of Parliament and prompted the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to come out in stout defence of Shah.

Trinamool Congress (TMC) MP Derek O'Brien submitted a notice to move a privilege motion against Shah in the Rajya Sabha where the home minister had said on Tuesday evening that Congress leaders would have got a place in heaven had they chanted the name of God rather than following the fashion of repeating Ambedkar's name.

The hullabaloo in Parliament also spilled onto the streets of the national capital and places as far as Maharashtra, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. In Delhi, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal led hundreds of supporters to gather outside the BJP office and protest noisily amid slogans "Amit Shah maafi mango, Amit Shah sharm karo".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and senior leader Rahul Gandhi, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee, DMK chief M K Stalin, Shiv Sena-UBT chief Uddhav Thackeray and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav were among those who slammed Shah for his remarks. (PTI)

## Conspiracy to save Amit Shah's skin: Priyanka

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Thursday termed the BJP's allegations that her brother and party leader Rahul Gandhi pushed a BJP MP a "conspiracy to save Home Minister Amit Shah's skin". She also accused the ruling party MPs of indulging in "goondagardi" to stop peacefully protesting opposition members from entering Parliament.

A face-off between the opposition and NDA MPs in Parliament premises over the alleged insult to B R Ambedkar left BJP MPs Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput injured. The BJP accused Rahul Gandhi of pushing 69-year-old Sarangi, a charge rejected by the Congress leader.

Priyanka Gandhi said Rahul Gandhi, carrying B R Ambedkar's photograph and raising slogan of 'Jai Bhim', was peacefully going inside Parliament but was stopped from doing so.

"We have been protesting for so many days and there is always space for people to enter freely. Peaceful protests are taking place daily from 10.30 am to 11 am. Today, for the first time, they (BJP MPs) protested and stopped everyone and then indulged in pushing and 'goondagardi' (hooliganism)," she told reporters in Parliament premises.

"And now to save Amit Shah's skin they have started this conspiracy that



'bhैया' has pushed someone. Right before my eyes, Kharge ji was pushed and he fell on the ground. Then they pushed a CPI(M) MP who fell on Kharge ji. I thought it would have broken his leg as it was visible from his face that he was hurt," the Congress general secretary said.

She said a chair was brought for Kharge, 82, from somewhere and pointed out that peaceful protests had been going on from their side.

"This is a conspiracy. We challenged

those who were stopping us to say 'Jai Bhim'. Why can't they raise the slogan of 'Jai Bhim'?" Priyanka Gandhi asked.

She also dismissed the BJP's claim that a passage was given to INDIA bloc MPs to enter Parliament and claimed that they were blocked from entering Parliament.

"We did not say anything, we kept raising our slogans and kept fighting for our Constitution. If people have any confusion that the BJP will protect the Constitution then that confusion should be

over," she said.

Priyanka Gandhi claimed that the BJP's real feelings have come out in the open in Amit Shah's remarks.

"Their (BJP's) real feelings was in display here. They have violent intentions, they cannot say Jai Bhim. I challenge BJP MPs to stand here and say Jai Bhim," she said.

Earlier, in a post in Hindi on X, Priyanka Gandhi said, "BJP is repeatedly insulting Babasaheb, who gave the Constitution to the country, who gave rights to every citizen, who changed the lives of crores of Dalits and deprived people with his thoughts and actions."

"By insulting him, the BJP has insulted the sentiments of crores of Dalits and deprived people of the country. The BJP should apologize to the country," she said.

The opposition on Wednesday seized on Shah's remarks on Ambedkar to corner the government and demanded his resignation for what they called was an insult to the architect of the Constitution.

The attack from virtually all opposition parties, including the Congress, TMC, DMK, RJD, Left parties and Shiv Sena-UBT, led to the adjournment of both Houses of Parliament and prompted the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to come out in stout defence of Shah. (PTI)

## Goa govt moving ahead despite personal attacks: CM Sawant

**PANAJI, Dec 19:** Chief Minister Pramod Sawant greeted people on Goa's Liberation Day on Thursday and said his government was progressing while overcoming personal criticism, prejudices and "tool kit of jealousy".

Sawant's remarks come in the wake of a personal attack on him and his wife by the opposition leaders in connection with a cash-for-jobs scam in the state.

Addressing the Goa Liberation Day function in Panaji, Sawant also said his government was working towards making the dream of the freedom fighters a reality through an all-inclusive growth. The Goa Liberation Day is celebrated on December 19 every year to mark the success of "Operation Vijay" undertaken by the armed forces to liberate the state from the Portuguese in 1961.

"We are providing a positive governance surpassing personal criticism, preconceived notions, and tool kit of jealousy," Sawant said.

Notably, Pramod Sawant's wife Sulakshana Sawant filed a defamation suit against AAP leader Sanjay Singh on Tuesday in a court in North Goa. She has sought Rs 100 crore in damages from the AAP politician for allegedly naming her in the cash-for-jobs scam. The CM said, "Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas and sabka prayas" are the hallmark of the Bharatiya Janata Party's rule in the coastal state, as he addressed a gathering comprising state ministers, people from various sections of the society and students.

Sawant further said his government was working proactively so that the state gets justice on the issue of the Mhadei river diversion through the central government authority PRAWAH.

The Centre constituted the Progressive River Authority for Water and Harmony (PRAWAH) last year to enable the compliance and implementation of the award and decisions of the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal.

The Mhadei River originates in Karnataka and runs through Maharashtra into Goa, meeting the Arabian Sea near Panaji. Goa and Karnataka are locked in a dispute over the diversion of the river water.

Sawant said steps have also been taken to ensure resumption of the iron ore mining in Goa through sustainable and environment-friendly way, which will provide employment opportunities to thousands of youth living in the mineral rich belt of the state, he said.

"We have also focussed on the ease of doing business, encouraging the new businesses and existing industries," the chief minister said.

He said the state government was working towards women empowerment by undertaking various initiatives under the Centre's Goa State Rural Livelihood Mission and Deen Dayal Antodaya Yojana, under which the self-help groups are provided assistance for self-employment. (PTI)

## RS dy chairman dismisses Oppn notice seeking removal of VP Dhankhar: Sources

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh on Thursday dismissed the impeachment notice given by the Opposition seeking the removal of Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar while ruling it as an act of impropriety, being severely flawed and drawn in haste to mar his reputation, sources said.

In his ruling, which was tabled in the House by Rajya Sabha secretary general P C Mody, the deputy chairman said the impeachment notice is part of a design to denigrate the nation's constitutional institutions and malign the incumbent Vice

## Amit Shah should resign, give up politics: Lalu

**PATNA, Dec 19:** Attacking Union Home Minister Amit Shah over his remarks on Babasaheb Ambedkar, RJD chief Lalu Prasad on Thursday said he should resign from the cabinet and "give up politics".

Prasad, a veteran politician, was responding to queries from reporters about the controversy that erupted over Shah's speech in Rajya Sabha earlier this week. "Amit Shah has gone mad. He is obviously full of hatred for our revered Babasaheb. I strongly condemn his madness," he said.

When Prasad was asked whether he too was in favour of the demand for Shah's resignation, he replied in the affirmative, but with characteristic bluntness.

"Of course, I want Shah out of the cabinet. He should resign. Not only that, he should give up politics," said the RJD supremo, who has been a staunch

opponent of the BJP for decades.

During a debate on Constitution in Rajya Sabha on Tuesday, Shah had said, "Abhi ek fashion ho gaya hai - Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar. Itna naam agar bhagwan ka lete to saam jant tak swarg mil jata (It has become a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar. If they had taken God's name so many times, they would have got a place in heaven)." He had also said the BJP was happy that the Congress was taking Ambedkar's name but it should also speak about its real sentiments towards him, and went on to narrate incidents where the opposition party had denied the respect due to him.

On Wednesday, Shah hit back at the Congress that is leading the opposition's attack on him, alleging the party twisted facts and distorted his comments. (PTI)

## Chhattisgarh: Flight service launched on Raipur-Ambikapur-Bilaspur route

**RAIPUR, Dec 19:** Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Thursday launched a flight service on the Raipur-Ambikapur-Bilaspur route in the state and called it a symbol of expansion of regional connectivity.

FlyBig Airlines's Twin Otter aircraft, equipped with 19 seats, will be operating on this route, the government said in a statement.

Speaking during the inaugural function at Swami Vivekananda Airport in Raipur, Sai said another historic step has been taken towards the development of Chhattisgarh.

He termed the launch of the Raipur-Ambikapur-Bilaspur air service a symbol of "expansion of our regional connectivity".

The starting fare for this service is Rs 999, which ensures that the general public can also avail the benefit of air travel, he said.

The service is a great example of the change that has come in the country under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said the statement quoting Sai.

Air connectivity to remote areas

like Surguja and Bastar will not only provide facilities to the citizens but also increase tourism and economic activities in these areas, the CM said.

The state has developed the airport of Ambikapur, named Maa Mahamaya Airport, at 80 crore. It has received the "3 C VFR category" licence and is suitable for operating 72-seater ATR-72 aircraft, he said.

Work is underway on a plan to connect Ambikapur with Varanasi, Prayagraj, Lucknow, Delhi and Kolkata, according to Sai.

"Our government has given special encouragement to enterprises like homestays and resorts in the new industrial policy, which is creating huge employment opportunities for local youth. Our effort is to take Chhattisgarh to new heights in the field of aviation in the next four years," he added.

BJP MP from Surguja Chintamani Maharaj and his wife boarded the flight as the first passengers and Sai handed them the boarding passes, the statement said. (PTI)

### ENGINEERING WORKS

E-TENDER NOTICE NO. 38 of 2024.

Date: 17-12-2024. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: Tender No.: DCSE/MLG-26-

2024. Name of work & Location: At

Malgoina- Maintenance and operation of

different valves provided at Gotanagar

Pump House, distribution of water to

service buildings, colonies, Central

Hospital etc. including other

establishments through the existing water

supply network of Malgoina-Nambari

area. Supply of rope pad required for

smooth functioning of entire water supply

system of Malgoina-Nambari area

including maintenance of Electro

Chlorinators (Sealcor Mac-500) provided

in the system of water supply at

intermediate boosting pump under the

jurisdiction of SEEW/Nambari & HS/

Malgoina for a period of one year. Tender

Value: ₹1,57,90,084.56; Earnest Money:

₹2,29,00,000; Tender No.: DCSE/MLG-

27-2024. Name of work & Location:

Assistance to desludging of open drain by

utilization of Railway owned excavator/

earth moving equipments (JCB) at

Nambari-HQ/Malgoina Railway area

including manual desludging (For One

year). Tender Value: ₹1,26,50,956.64;

Earnest Money: ₹2,13,300.00; E-tender

will be closed at 13:00 hrs. on 08-01-

2025 and will be opened at 13:00 hrs.

on 08-01-2025. For details please visit

[www.inrps.gov.in](http://www.inrps.gov.in)

Dy. Chief Engineer/Estate,

Malgoina

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

Serving Customers with a smile

### ENGINEERING WORKS

AT LUMDING DIVISION

E-Tender Notice No. LMG/Engg/

164 of 2024; Dated: 17-12-2024. E-

tenders are invited by the undersigned

for the following work: SN. 1. Brief

Description of Item: Provision of RSC

Room in connection with interlocking of

9 Nos. manned engineering LC Gates

(ST-25, ST-62, CS-5, CS-24, CS-26,

CS-35, CS-36, CS-40 & CS-50) with

provision of ELB and emergency sliding

boom in Guwahati-Furkating Jn. and

Chaparmukh Jn.-Senchoi Jn.-Amoni.

Tender Value: ₹1,01,71,824.03;

Earnest Money: ₹2,00,900.00. E-

tenders will be closed at 15:00 hrs. on

09-01-2025 and opened at 15:00 hrs.

on 10-01-2025. The complete

information with tender documents of

above e-tender will be available upto

15:00 hrs. of 09-01-2025 in website

<http://www.inrps.gov.in>

DRM/Works, Lumding

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

Serving Customers with a smile

## Grit, perseverance help Vijaya Vasave become Maharashtra's first trans woman forest guard

**PUNE, Dec 19:** Facing hardships and torment early on due to her sexual orientation, Vijaya Vasave has not only overcome obstacles but shown grit to lead a dignified life by becoming the first trans woman forest guard in Maharashtra.

Vasave (30) had been mocked at and abused by people, leading her to attempt suicide three times. But once she acquired a scientific knowledge about her sexuality and got family support, she mustered courage to undergo gender transition from a male to a trans woman.

From then on, it was no looking back for her and she cleared a competitive exam to secure employment in the state forest department recently.

"I am happy now that I am treated with dignity and respect by my family, village and at my workplace," Vasave told PTI over phone on Wednesday.

Hailing from a tribal community



native of the Satpuda mountain range in Nandurbar district, Vasave is currently posted in Akkalkuwa tehsil of Nandurbar as a forest guard.

She holds a master's degree in social welfare from the Pune-based Karve Institute of Social Service.

Born as a male, named 'Vijay', Vasave studied at a residential school for tribal students in Nandurbar.

"My schooling days were full of hardships...not only my fellow students but even teachers made fun of my effeminate nature. The constant abuse fuelled suicidal tendencies, and I attempted suicide three times. During my early school and graduation days, I was trapped in a male body, yearning to be free," she said.

Her struggles continued even during the college years in Nashik. "As I lost confidence, I approached a counsellor who prescribed some pills to 'cure' me. The pills didn't help. I then confided in my sister, who was also unaware what could be done," Vasave said.

She said her sister took her to a 'mantrik' (spiritual healer), who claimed Vasave was a victim of "black magic".

"Although I wasn't convinced, I followed along because of my family's insistence but later stopped it," she said.

Vasave's life took a positive turn when Pune-based LGBTQ+ activist Bindumadhav Khire conducted a lecture on 'sexuality' at her college.

"I finally got scientific answers to questions about my sexuality. He introduced me to a renowned psychiatrist in Pune. I also watched interviews of successful transgender individuals and showed them to my family, which helped them under-

stand and accept me," she said. She decided to undergo a gender transition in 2019, which included both surgical and hormonal treatment, to embrace her new identity as 'Vijaya'.

"The transition process was long. By 2022, it was complete, and I was finally freed from the male body that imprisoned me for so many years. My family supported me emotionally and even helped financially for the surgery," she said.

"The issues I faced...my life was so full of hardships for so many years that having a career was never on the cards. But the support and help from the Deepstambh Foundation in Jalgaon gave me the right direction," Vasave said.

With its guidance and encouragement, she started preparing for competitive exams.

Vasave initially appeared for a police recruitment exam but could not succeed. (PTI)

## HDFC BANK

Registered Office: HDFC Bank House, Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai - 400 013 and having one of its office as

Retail Portfolio Management at HDFC Bank Ltd, 1st Floor, I-Think Techno Campus,

Kanjurmarg (East), Mumbai - 400042.

### SALE INTIMATION AND PUBLIC NOTICE FOR SALE OF SECURITIES PLEDGED TO HDFC BANK LTD.

The below mentioned Borrowers of HDFC Bank Ltd. (the "Bank") are hereby notified regarding the sale of securities pledged to the Bank, for availing credit facilities in the nature of Loan/Overdraft Against Securities.

Due to persistent default by the Borrowers in making repayment of the outstanding dues as per agreed loan terms, the below loan accounts are in delinquent status. The Bank has issued multiple notices to these Borrowers, including the final sale notice on the below-mentioned date whereby, Bank had invoked the pledge and provided 7 days' time to the Borrower to repay the entire outstanding dues in the below accounts, failing which, Bank would be at liberty to sell the pledged securities without issuing further notice in this regard.

The Borrowers have neglected and failed to make due repayments, therefore, Bank in exercise of its rights under the loan agreement as a pledgee has decided to sell / dispose off the Securities on or after 28<sup>th</sup> December 2024 for recovering the dues owed by the Borrowers to the Bank. The Borrowers are, also, notified that, at any time, the value of the pledged securities falls further due to volatility in the stock market to create further deficiency in the margin requirement then Bank shall at its discretion sell the pledged security within one (1) calendar day, without any further notice in this regard. The Borrower(s) shall remain liable to the Bank for repayment of any remaining outstanding amount, post adjustment of the proceeds from sale of pledged securities.

Sr. No.	Loan Account Number	Borrower's Name	Outstanding Amount as on 17 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2024 (In Indian Rupees)	Date of Sale Notice
1	XXXX7999	UMESH CHANDGOTHA	9,00,364.87	18-Dec-24
2	XXXX3793	RHEMBOR G SAIBON	9,95,239.78	18-Dec-24
3	XXXX9802	SANTOSH KR TIWARI		



# What can be more horrendous: Bombay HC on illegal banners and hoardings

## 'Don't push the court to take strict action'

**MUMBAI, Dec 19:** The Bombay High Court on Thursday termed the increasing number of illegal hoardings and banners in Maharashtra as "horrendous" and "a sad situation".

A division bench of Chief Justice D K Upadhyaya and Justice Amit Borkar issued notice to all political parties directing them to show cause as to why contempt proceedings should not be initiated against them for defiance of court orders.

For the past several years, the HC has been calling for strict action against illegal banners and hoardings and had also ordered all political parties to file an undertaking assuring that their workers would not put up such hoardings.

All political parties- BJP, Congress, Shiv Sena, NCP and MNS - had then submitted an undertaking.

"The court had in its earlier orders taken on record the undertakings given by the political parties. However, it appears that these political parties have not come true with the same," the HC said.

"We issue notice requiring them (political parties) to show cause as to why appropriate action for defiance of the judgment passed in 2017 should not be taken against them under the provisions of the Contempt of Court Act," it said.

The bench noted that post elections the number of unauthorized



hoardings, banners and posters have increased across the state.

"What can be more horrendous than this? Despite our judgment (of 2017) directing strict action against illegal hoardings, see where we are headed to. This is a very sad situation," the court said.

The bench questioned as to why orders and judgments are required in such cases when there is a duty cast upon the government and civic bodies under law.

The bench also cautioned civic authorities and said if the court was pushed to a corner then it would be compelled to take strict action.

"Don't push the court to a corner where we have to then take strict action. We are cautioning you (civic bodies)," the bench said.

## CBI court grants bail to 3 arrested in Odisha bribery case

**BHUBANESWAR, Dec 19:** A special CBI court here granted conditional bail to three persons arrested in connection with a bribery case in Odisha.

The court on Wednesday granted bail to Chanchal Mukherjee, group general manager of the CPSU Bridge and Roof Company (India) Limited, and contractors Santosh Moharana and Debadutta Mohapatra. The bail was granted by the court on the production of a bond of ₹ 1 lakh and two sureties each, said advocate Subham Satpathy, one of the lawyers engaged by the accused persons.

While granting bail, the court put a condition that the accused persons cannot leave Bhubaneswar without its permission. They will also not attempt to tamper with evidence and will cooperate with the investigation.

The CBI had on the evening of December 7 arrested the trio and seized ₹ 10 lakh from a car outside a hotel in the city.

According to the CBI, the accused were involved in corrupt and illegal activities related to awarding work orders and clearing bills in exchange for bribes. Later, the central agency had interrogated the trio after taking them on remand in two phases, for eight days.

Following the arrest and during the course of the investigation, the CBI also summoned several people including senior IAS officer Bishnupada Sethi.

Meanwhile, the Odisha government said it has taken all steps that were required and would take further steps on the basis of the findings of the CBI into alleged involvement of Sethi in the case.

The state government on Tuesday transferred and appointed Sethi as the officer on special duty in the General Administration & Public

Grievance Department, after the CBI issued a summons to him in a bribery case. Sethi, a 1995-batch IAS officer, was the principal secretary of Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and ST&SC Development, Minorities & Backward Classes Welfare departments. He also had additional charge as principal secretary of Odia Language, Literature & Culture Department.

Deputy Chief Minister K V Singh Deo, while replying to reporters' queries, said, "We have taken all steps that were required... He (Sethi) has been summoned by the CBI and he will tell whatever there is to the agency. When the final report (of the investigation) comes out, the state government will take steps based on the findings."

A day-long wait by reporters near the CBI office here turned futile as Sethi did not turn up to record his statement in the alleged bribery case. The CBI had on December 10 issued a summons to Sethi asking him to depose before the CBI investigating officer on December 11 at its Bhubaneswar office.

Though Sethi did not turn up, the CBI has grilled three drivers working in separate government departments and engaged in the duty of the principal secretary.

Several attempts to get a statement from Sethi also failed to yield any result as he did not respond to calls or messages. The CBI also remained tight-lipped on its next move in the event Sethi did not cooperate with the investigation.

The CBI, in a letter to Sethi, on December 10 said, "It is learnt that you are acquainted with some important and relevant facts and circumstances of the instant CBI case, which are required to be ascertained from you." (PTI)

Saraf submitted to the court that around 22,000 unauthorized hoardings were removed post elections.

The bench, however, said the number was insignificant when the total number of such illegal hoardings was not known.

The court perused certain photographs submitted by the petitioners in the case showing unauthorized hoardings put up outside the HC building and also the city civil court.

The bench questioned what action was taken against the person who put up these hoardings and said they have defaced the court premises.

"These photos are testament to complete apathy by the authorities who are not only mandated to check the menace of illegal hoardings but are also under the obligation to follow orders of this court," it said.

The bench noted that despite the undertakings submitted by the political parties, the number of illegal hoardings, banners and posters have not reduced. "Rather it appears to have increased," the bench said.

The court noted the government was not bereft of power to compel all civic authorities to comply with the orders of the court.

It posted the matter for further hearing on January 27. (PTI)

The court said it would be compelled to issue notice initiating contempt action against civic body chiefs too.

The court said it was aware of the efforts being taken by the government and civic authorities for removal of unauthorized hoardings, banners and posters but added these were not enough.

"Why are they even allowed to be put up? You say efforts are made. We are not questioning that but they are clearly inadequate," it said.

While civic bodies are incurring expenditure on deploying staff and infrastructure to remove illegal hoardings, the persons who put up such hoardings, banners and posters are enjoying their lives, the HC said.

Advocate General Birendra

## Representation of SCs, STs in govt work force as per prescribed limit: Centre

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** The representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the central government workforce is as per the prescribed limit, the Rajya Sabha was informed on Thursday.

According to the information provided by the ministries/departments, as on January 1, 2024, the number of employees belonging to SCs, STs and Other Backward Classes, OBCs, is 5.47 lakh, 2.82 lakh and 8.55 lakh. Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh said in a written reply.

"The representation of SC and ST is as per the prescribed limit of 15% and 7.5% respectively. The representation of OBCs in direct recruitment has also consistently been more than 27% during the last 10 years," he said. To a query seeking reasons for removal of data on reservation in Union government jobs and positions from the Annual Report (2023-24) of DoPT (Department of Personnel and Training), Singh said obtaining data/information from ministries/departments is a time-consuming process.

"At the time of finalising the Annual Report, the relevant data received from various ministries/departments was incomplete and required reconciliation. Hence, the same could not be included in the Annual Report (2023-24) of DoPT. The data has since been reconciled," the minister said.

Replying to another question on total sanctioned



strength of posts and vacancies in the central government, he said occurrence and filling up of vacant posts in various ministries/departments is a continuous process. "The data/details of vacancies are maintained by the respective ministries/departments. The ministries/departments of the central government have been directed, from time to time, to fill up the vacant posts in a time bound manner," Singh said.

He said vacant posts have been filled up through the 'Rozgar Mela' launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on October 22, 2022.

"13 Rozgar Melas have been held at central level in 45-50 cities across the various states/Union Territories. Several lakh appointment letters have been distributed in the Rozgar Melas," the minister said. (PTI)

## Kurla bus tragedy: Process to revoke driver More's licence has begun, say RTO officials

**MUMBAI, Dec 19:** The Maharashtra Motor Vehicles department has initiated the process of revoking the driving licence of the bus driver involved in the December 9 Kurla accident, which left nine persons dead and around 40 injured, officials said on Thursday.

The Regional Transport Office (RTO) at Wadala, which has jurisdiction over the eastern suburbs of Mumbai, has issued a show cause notice to bus driver Sanjay More as part of the process to revoke the licence, they added.

Deputy Regional Transport Officer Pallavi Kothawade confirmed the development and said the process of cancelling More's licence started earlier this week.

"We issued a show cause notice to More on Monday. Further action will be taken under Motor Vehicles Act based on his reply to the notice," Kothawade told PTI.

Wadala RTO regional transport officer Ravi Gaikwad did not respond to queries on the issue. Meanwhile, other officials said Mumbai police had written to Wadala RTO seeking revoking of More's licence due to the severity of the accident.

### Remove 20 per cent export duty on onions: Ajit Pawar to Centre

**NAGPUR, Dec 19:** Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar on Thursday urged the BJP-led Centre to remove the 20 per cent levy on onion exports and provide relief to the grower of the bulbous vegetable.

In a letter to Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, Pawar highlighted the issues concerning farmers from Nashik district, where onion is grown in large quantities.

"The onions grown here (in Nashik) are available in other states of India and also exported in large quantities. As of today, onions from the summer yield have been exhausted and the fresh crop has reached various (Agriculture Produce) Market Committees in Maharashtra," Pawar wrote.

Due to the arrival of a large stock of onions, farmers are now in distress as they are forced to sell their produce at a much lower rate since they have yet to receive any minimum support price, said Pawar. They are selling onions at an average of ₹ 2,400 per quintal, he said. (PTI)

## Bihar to develop more industrial areas, will acquire 10,000 acre of land in next fiscal: Dy CM

**PATNA, Dec 19:** The Bihar government acquired 8,000 acre of land in the current financial year for developing industrial areas and would obtain another 10,000 acre next fiscal to attract investment in the state, Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary said on Thursday.

Addressing the inaugural session of the two-day Bihar Business Connect 2024, he said the NDA government in the state was taking several steps to boost investments.

"In the current financial year, departments concerned have acquired 8,000 acre of land for developing industrial areas in different parts of the state. The government is now preparing to acquire an additional 10,000 acre in the coming financial year for the purpose," Choudhary, who holds the Finance portfolio, said.

"The Department of Industries in association with several other concerned wings of the state government is providing an enabling eco-system for the overall industrial development of Bihar through appropriate policy interventions," he added. Choudhary said that in addition to the efforts being made by the state government, the Centre was working to connect 10 "smaller and unconnected" areas in Bihar by air.

Four expressways are also being developed in the state and it would be a game changer for industrial development, he said, maintaining that the country as well as Bihar were going through a "golden period".

Vijay Kumar Sinha, the other deputy chief minister, said India's



growth was incomplete without Bihar. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Bihar is witnessing growth, especially in terms of industrial development," he said.

Sinha said the state government recently approved the Bihar Film Promotion Policy, which will boost investment, employment and tourism through cinema, and help change perceptions about the state.

"We have the talent to take Bihar's heritage to the world stage. There is enormous potential for filmmaking in Bihar. The glorious past of Bihar in the field of art and culture, and natural cinematic treasures are enough to attract filmmakers. We are inviting filmmakers to come and explore the state," said Sinha, who holds the charge of the Art, Culture and Youth Department.

The state government is also preparing to set up a film city and film training institutes, he said.

Speaking at the programme, state Labour Minister Santosh Kumar

Singh said Bihar is the hub of skilled and non-skilled labourers.

"Bihar is considered the human resources capital of India as 60 per cent population belongs to the working class. The state government has taken several measures for the welfare of skilled and non-skilled labourers. The availability of labourers is a must for industrial growth and that is available here in abundance," he said.

Earlier, Industries Department Secretary Bandana Preyashi said the state government would soon unveil five new sector-specific policy incentives to attract investment in the state.

"We see Bihar as India's next growth engine," Preyashi said, noting that the state is known as the cradle of Indian civilisation, the birthplace of Buddhism, and it is home to the world's oldest university.

"Now, Bihar is writing a new story. Bihar -- from the land of history to the land of industry," she said. (PTI)

## After ferry tragedy, life jackets mandatory for boat rides from Gateway of India

**MUMBAI, Dec 19:** A day after a ferry-Navy craft collision claimed 13 lives off the Mumbai coast, authorities on Thursday made life jackets mandatory for all people taking boat rides from the Gateway of India.

Some tourists, however, said the life jackets would be of help only if people know how to use them. The authorities should instruct people how to use the life jackets in case of an emergency, they said.

Some survivors of the tragedy on Wednesday claimed the ferry did not have enough life jackets.

Thirteen persons, including a Navy personnel and two contractual naval employees, were killed and nearly 100 rescued after the Navy craft carrying out engine trials dashed against the passenger ferry 'Neel Kamal' on Wednesday afternoon.

The ferry was carrying more than 100 passengers from the Gateway of India to the Elephanta Island.

Devidas Jadhav, an assistant boat

inspector deputated at the Gateway of India, told PTI that they have made the use of life jackets mandatory for every passenger taking ferry boat to Mandva near Alibaba (in neighbouring Raigad), Elephanta Island or while going for a short ride of the Mumbai harbour.

Sangeeta Dalvi, who was travelling to Mandva with her husband for some work, said passengers must use life jackets as they can save lives in case of an emergency.

She also said there was no need for the people to be scared after Wednesday's accident.

"Such tragedies do not happen everyday. We do not avoid travelling by roads though everyday several accidents occur on roads," Dalvi added. Suyesh Sharma, a tourist from Chhatisgarh who came to the Gateway of India to take a boat ride as he had time before his return by an evening flight, said life jackets does not prove much helpful in the high sea unless people know how to use them. (PTI)

## MP creates history with Guinness World Record at International Gita Mahotsav

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** In a monumental celebration of spirituality and culture, Madhya Pradesh's Department of Culture's International Gita Mahotsav at Bhopal set a Guinness World Record for the "Largest Simultaneous Hindu Text Recital" recently, said an official release on Thursday.

The event was aimed at promoting the timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and showcasing Madhya Pradesh's cultural heritage.

The Guinness World Record attempt was planned and executed under the leadership of Nischal Barot, a renowned consultant for large-scale events and record-setting initiatives.

The event, presided over by Madhya Pradesh chief minister Mohan Yadav, achieved the milestone with an incredible 3,721 participants reciting verses from the Bhagavad Gita together.

Commenting on the achievement, chief minister Yadav, said,

"This historic achievement reflects the cultural and spiritual strength of our people. The Bhagavad Gita is a timeless guide for humanity, and through this event, we have not only celebrated its teachings but also inspired a deeper connection to its values of unity, self-discipline and universal harmony."

World record consultant and strategist, Nischal Barot, said, "The achievement not only showcases our cultural richness but also our organisational prowess and global aspirations. We look forward to working with Madhya Pradesh and other states to set more records."

Additionally, to the record-setting recital, the International Gita Mahotsav event featured cultural performances and spiritual discourses highlighting the profound wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita. The celebration attracted thousands of participants, including devotees and scholars, who witnessed this historic moment, the release stated.

## Developed countries spent more on fossil fuel subsidies in 2023 than new climate finance package

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Developed countries spent USD 378 billion subsidising fossil fuels in 2023, more than the USD 300 billion they have collectively committed to provide annually to the developing world by 2035 to tackle climate change, according to the latest data.

An analysis by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) showed that government support for fossil fuels reached at least USD 1.5 trillion in 2023, the second-highest annual total on record, after 2022 when the Russia-Ukraine war triggered a global fossil fuel price crisis.

The 10 largest subsidisers of fossil fuels in 2023 included Russia, Germany, Iran, China, Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, France, and Indonesia.

The data revealed that 23 developed nations (Annex II countries) -- mandated under the UN climate convention to provide climate finance to the developing world -- spent USD 378 billion on fossil



fuel subsidies.

At the UN climate conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, last month, these nations committed to providing USD 300 billion to developing countries by 2035 to help them tackle climate change -- a far cry from the USD 1.3 trillion that the Global South needs annually to cope with the rapidly warming world.

India, Bolivia, Nigeria, and Malawi, speaking on behalf of a

group of 45 least developed countries (LDCs), severely criticised the new climate finance package for the developing world.

India argued that USD 300 billion is insufficient to implement ambitious national climate plans known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and pointed out that when adjusted for inflation, it falls short of the previous USD 100 billion goal agreed in 2009.

IISD researchers said developed countries spending USD 378 billion on fossil fuel subsidies shows that public funds are available but are being "directed in the wrong direction". They suggested that fiscal space freed up through fossil fuel subsidy reforms could be redirected to meet climate finance commitments.

Fossil fuels -- coal, oil, and gas -- are the largest contributors to climate change, accounting for over 75 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions.

Although many governments have taken steps to reduce the carbon intensity of their economies, certain policies still encourage fossil fuel production and consumption. Fossil fuel subsidies are a prime example of such policies.

A fossil fuel subsidy refers to a government intervention that provides benefits or preferences for fossil fuel production or consumption relative to alternatives. (PTI)

# Sharmila Tagore, Mohan Agashe on new film 'Outhouse': It talks about aging and companionship

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** "Outhouse" co-stars Sharmila Tagore and Mohan Agashe's friendship dates back to the '90s when they worked on Mira Nair's "Mississippi Masala".

The two actors have reunited for Sunil Sukthankar's light-hearted family comedy, which was written by late Sumitra Bhavne and releases in cinemas on Friday.

Recalling how they shot "Mississippi Masala", Nair's crossover romance drama, also featuring Sarita Choudhury and Denzel Washington, Tagore said the whole cast and crew were put up in the same hotel and had a great time.

"It was equal for all of us. We had so much fun after work. Mohan Agashe was there and everybody... And there are also a lot of women in that film. The wardrobe, the screenplay writer, and the director were all women. So it was great fun working in the film," Tagore

told PTI in an interview.

Agashe shared that his co-star, who was already famous globally for her roles in Satyajit Ray's films "Apur Sansar" and "Devi" as well as several Hindi hits, used to be scared of "lizards". Tagore corrected him, saying "cockroaches".

The actor said his job was to make the creepy crawlies leave her room.

"And in exchange, I would get a nice breakfast. Since we were there in 1990, she has always been a star but much more of a star in the migrated Indian community and their town. So every evening, she had some invitation for a wonderful dinner and she never went alone. She always took us along, myself and Mohan Gokhale. We thoroughly enjoyed our stay there," Agashe recalled.

The friendship has grown over the years and now whenever Agashe visits Delhi, Tagore calls him over for din-

ner.

"I get one dinner from her and she comes and makes it a point to see my plays, films and she enjoys them. And not only



her but also her daughter, Soha, had come with her daughter for my play 'Par Hame Khelna Hai'... So every time I was there, I enjoyed being there with them," the 73-year-old actor said.

"Outhouse" explores unexpected companionship, inter-

generational connections, and the transformative power of trust and empathy through the story where Tagore plays an animator who is roped in by her grandson to find their missing dog who has befriended a recluse man, Agashe.

The 80-year-old actor, who was last seen in OTT film "Gulmohar", said she was able to visualise the story of "Outhouse" when she heard the script.

"In this film, we are not really pouring anybody with the message, so it's a very delightful film. It talks about aging and the need for companionship, how a lot of older people are living alone and there is nothing really wrong about it. It's wonderful, we like to be alone.

"At the same time, we are connected with the world. It says all these things, there is a child, there is a dog... It was a lot of fun and we had a lovely time shooting for it in Pune." (PTI)

## Was reminded of Amitabh Bachchan's 'Hum' while playing dual roles in 'Baby John': Varun Dhawan



**MUMBAI, Dec 19:** Bollywood star Varun Dhawan on Wednesday said he drew references from megastar Amitabh Bachchan's cult film "Hum" while preparing to play dual roles in the upcoming action feature "Baby John".

Dhawan, known for "Badlapur", "October", and "Bhediya", said Bachchan continues to inspire the newer generation of actors.

Directed by Mukul Anand, "Hum" followed a dock worker called Tiger, who renames himself as Shekhar to safeguard his family from his violent past. The 1991 film also starred Rajinikanth, Govinda, Kimi Katkar, and Shilpa Shirodkar.

"I liked 'Hum' and it featured Rajinikanth sir, Govinda ji, and Mukul Anand is one of my favourite directors. When he made the film, it was ahead of its time. The way he had shown the past and present of Amit ji, it was great.

"Amit ji has done so many iconic films, there's so much to learn from him, the newer generation of actors should not forget that bible. There's a shot in 'Hum' where he fights and then runs. I thought of that scene while doing this film," the actor told reporters here at the press conference of "Baby John".

The film, directed by Kalees, will see Dhawan play a cop named Satya Verma and John, his alter ego.

The actor said "Baby John" was the most emotionally challenging film of his career. "There were certain scenes where I felt emotionally drained. Kalees sir would tell me not to get emotional but sometimes I would just break down," he added.

Dhawan also thanked singer Diljit Dosanjh for lending his voice to the song "Nain Matakka" in the film. They are also set to share screen space in upcoming war drama "Border 2".

"Working with Diljit was so easy, we had so much fun together. He is a pure artist, it's beautiful to see him perform. I'm going to be working with him as a co-star in 'Border 2'. I'm thankful to Diljit paaji for the song." (PTI)



## Veteran Malayalam actress Meena Ganesh passes away at 81

**PALAKKAD (KERALA), Dec 19:** Veteran Malayalam film-cum-serial actress Meena Ganesh died on Thursday at a private hospital in Shornur in Palakkad district where she was undergoing treatment for the last five days, Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) said. She was 81.

FEFKA general secretary B Unnikrishnan, in a statement, said that Meena Ganesh acted in over 200 films, 25 serials and several plays in her long acting career.

He said that she was undergoing treatment at the private hospital following a stroke.

She made her debut in 1976 in P A Backer's film 'Manimuzhakkam' and her roles in movies like 'Nandanam', 'Meeshamadhavan' and 'Karumadikuttan' attracted audience attention, the FEFKA Directors Union said in a Facebook post.

She is the wife of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award winner and famous playwright and director N N Ganesh and her son is Manoj Ganesh, a well known serial director and FMTV Directors Union member, the post, paying tributes to her, said. (PTI)

## KARAN AUJLA DELIVERS ELECTRIFYING PERFORMANCE IN DELHI-NCR

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** It was an evening filled with music and madness as Karan Aujla mesmerised fans with an electrifying performance in the Delhi-NCR region that turned out to be star-studded affair with Varun Dhawan, Badshah and Nora Fatehi joining in the fun on the first two days of the Punjabi sensation's India tour.

The singer, who gave voice to the viral Vicky Kaushal song "Tauba Tauba", performed in Gurugram's Airia Mall on December 15 and 17 as part of his "It Was All A Dream" tour, will take to the stage once again on December 19.

While the first show drew over 12,000 concert goers, the second concert drew a bigger crowd with over 15,000 fans turning up to listen to the musician, also known for chartbusters "Softly", "Wavy" and "Making Memories".

The crowd went "Aujla, Aujla" when the singer made a dramatic entry through a trap door in the middle of the stage and greeted them with an enthusiastic "Aur Dilliwalon!" Aujla may have become a sensation for many post "Tauba Tauba", but his true fans have followed the Canada-based singer for years. "I have been listening to Karan Aujla since 2016. I have listened to almost all of his songs. He is a great artist, and I am excited that I got a chance to come to his concert," a fan said.

Then, there were those who wanted the singer to croon their favourites like "Softly" and "Bachke Bachke". (PTI)



## Oscar-shortlisted films 'Universal Language', 'Hollywoodgate' to headline Red Lorry Film Festival

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** The Red Lorry Film Festival is set to screen Academy Award hopefuls "Universal Language" and "Hollywoodgate" at its upcoming second edition, set to be held between March 21 and March 23 in Mumbai and Hyderabad.

Curated by BookMyShow, the line-up promises an exploration of world cinema offering over 120 titles, including critically-acclaimed films across languages, genres, and cultures up for the showcase.

"Universal Language", Canada's official entry to Oscars 2025 in the best international film category, and "Hollywoodgate", shortlisted in the best documentary feature film segment, are leading the pack at the film gala.

While "Universal Language" is billed as an absurdist comedy-drama film set in a mysterious and surreal

interzone somewhere between Tehran and Winnipeg, "Hollywoodgate" provides an intense and on-the-ground look at post-2021 Taliban-ruled Kabul.

English rom-com drama "This Time Next Year"; "To Die Alone", a powerful LGBTQ+ story of love and isolation; documentary "999: The Forgotten Girls"; "I'm Nevenka", a drama-based on real-life events; psychological horror film "Mom"; "When The Light Breaks", the opening film for the Un Certain Regard selection of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival; and "Filmlovers!", a French autofiction essay film are also part of the line-up of the Red Lorry Film Festival.

Ashish Saksena, COO - Cinemas, BookMyShow, said the success of the inaugural Red Lorry Film Festival has reinforced our belief in the grow-

ing demand for world cinema among Indian audiences.

"For our second edition, we've curated a powerful lineup of films that push the boundaries of storytelling, exploring themes of love, loss, identity and survival," Saksena said in a statement.

In the coming year, the film gala is also headed to Hyderabad for Red Lorry Film Festival: Parallel Verse.

"As we expand to Hyderabad and continue to receive love in Mumbai, our goal is to create unforgettable cinematic experiences that showcase the transformative power of storytelling. We remain committed to connecting audiences with the magic of cinema in its most impactful form," added Saksena.

Cinephiles can purchase their passes exclusively on BookMyShow, starting at just ₹ 750. (PTI)



## Red Bull picks Liam Lawson as Max Verstappen's F1 teammate in 2025

**MILTON KEYNES (ENGLAND), Dec 19:** Liam Lawson will partner world champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull in 2025, the Formula 1 team said on Thursday. Lawson, a New Zealander, replaces Sergio Perez, who was dropped on Wednesday after months of poor results.

The 22-year-old Lawson will switch from Racing Bulls, Red Bull's sister team, after racing as a replacement driver in 2023 and this year. He started in Red Bull's junior program.

"There's no doubt that racing alongside Max, a four-time champion and undoubtedly one of the greatest drivers ever seen in F1, is a daunting task," Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said. "but I'm sure Liam can rise to that challenge and deliver some outstanding results for us next year."

Lawson said it was a "lifelong dream" to be racing with Red Bull.

"This is something I've wanted and worked toward since I was 8 years old," he said. "It's been an incredible journey so far."

Perez's contract was terminated two years early, the Mexican ditched after being rarely competitive this season. He had not won a race since April 2023 and the last time he finished higher than sixth in a grand prix was in May. Meanwhile, Verstappen continued to dominate F1.

Lawson joined Red Bull's junior program in 2019 and made his F1 debut at the Dutch Grand Prix in 2023 with Scuderia AlphaTauri — which was later rebranded as Racing Bulls — in place of the injured Daniel Ricciardo. He completed five races for the team that year.

This year, Dawson had a points-scoring finish at the United States Grand Prix, again replacing Ricciardo. (AP)

## MBSG are at top of the league leaderboard ISL: FC GOA AIM TO END MOHUN BAGAN'S UNBEATEN RUN



**MARGAO, Dec 19:** FC Goa will seek to snap a rampaging Mohun Bagan Super Giant's eight-match unbeaten streak in the Indian Super League (ISL) when the two sides square off in a 12th round match here on Friday. FC Goa, under India head coach Manolo Marquez, will also aim to improve their record against the Mariners, having lost five of their eight meetings in the ISL, including a narrow 0-1 defeat in their most recent fixture in February.

Super Giant's unbeaten run has seen them win seven and

draw one of their last eight ISL games, and that has put them on top of the league leaderboard with 26 points from 11 matches, winning eight, drawing twice and losing once.

On the other hand, the Gaurs are placed fourth with 19 points from the same number of games. Both these teams have been in equally efficient form upfront, with the Kolkata-based side netting 22 times in the competition thus far, as compared to the 21 of the Goa club.

However, the visitors have

been comparatively better organized at the back, as they have conceded 10 goals as opposed to the 15 of FC Goa.

Head-to-head, FC Goa have won twice, whereas Super Giant have emerged victorious five times in the eight times these two teams have faced each other in the ISL.

FC Goa head coach Marquez admitted that the Mariners have a nice mix of international and domestic stars that make them a strong opponent.

"I feel that we are playing one of the strongest teams in the

competition. Mohun Bagan have most of the top national team players, and they've spent a lot on getting good foreigners too," Marquez said.

"We need to keep fighting to win" Super Giant head coach Jose Molina lauded his team for not giving up under any circumstance. "The mentality of Mohun Bagan Super Giant is to fight every game till the end. We have to attack and defend well, communicate properly, but most importantly we need to keep fighting to get the win," Molina said. (PTI)

## Arsenal, Liverpool and Newcastle progress in English League Cup

**LONDON, Dec 19:** Arsenal, Newcastle and Liverpool advanced in the English League Cup on Wednesday to ensure a heavyweight lineup for the semifinals.

Gabriel Jesus scored a hat trick — including a crucial second goal from an offside position — as Arsenal beat Crystal Palace 3-2 to reach the last four for the first time since the 2021-22 season.

Liverpool kept alive its title defense by winning 2-1 at Southampton, with Darwin Nunez and Harvey Elliott the scorers in the first half for the leaders of the Premier League and Champions League.

Newcastle defeated Brentford 3-1 mainly thanks to two first-half goals by Italy midfielder Sandro Tonali and progressed to the semifinals for the second time in three seasons. The Saudi-controlled club from the north east, which hasn't won a major trophy since 1955, lost in the League Cup final to Manchester United in 2023.

United visits Tottenham on Thursday in the remaining quarterfinal match, guaranteeing that the semifinals will feature four of the biggest teams in the country.

Jesus had previously only scored one goal in 20 appearances in all competitions this season — and that was also in the English League Cup at second-tier Preston in October.

So the Brazil striker's first hat trick for Arsenal came as something of a surprise, as did the standard of his finishing.

There was luck for Jesus, too, as replays showed that he was offside when running through to score his goal that made it 2-1 in the 73rd minute at Emirates Stadium. How-

ever, there is no video review until the semifinals of the competition so the goal wasn't ruled out.

Jesus, who had equalized in the 54th with an excellently taken chip over goalkeeper Dean Henderson, completed his hat trick in the 81st by running through unmarked and smashing a low strike past Henderson.

That gave his team a two-goal cushion but former Arsenal striker Eddie Nketiah ensured a nervy finish by heading home a cross in the 85th to make it 3-1. Jean-Philippe Mateta had put Palace ahead in the fourth minute.

Liverpool has now gone 20 games unbeaten within a single season in all competitions for the first time since 1996, according to Premier League stats supplier Opta.

Things could hardly be going any better for Arne Slot, who fielded a weakened, heavily rotated team — featuring Japan midfielder Wataru Endo at center back — that still had too much for Southampton.

Nunez particularly enjoyed his goal, which came after he had been jeered by Southampton fans for missing an early chance. After putting Liverpool ahead, he put his finger to his mouth in a "shush" gesture to the home crowd.

Interim coach Simon Rusk took charge of Southampton, the last-place team in the Premier League, following the dismissal of manager Russell Martin on Sunday — hours after a 5-0 loss to Tottenham.

Slot sat in the stands for the match at St. Mary's stadium as he was serving a touchline suspension after getting booked for the third time this season last weekend. (AP)

## Intercontinental Cup: Real Madrid beat Pachuca in final

**LUSAIL (QATAR), Dec 19:** Real Madrid beat Mexican team Pachuca 3-0 in the Intercontinental Cup final Wednesday, making Carlo Ancelotti the most decorated coach in the club's history.

Ancelotti lifted his 15th title with the Spanish powerhouse, surpassing the 14 trophies that he and Miguel Muñoz had won. Muñoz coached the team in the 1960s and 70s.

"Very happy, it's a triumph," said the 65-year-old Ancelotti, who on Tuesday was named men's coach of the year at FIFA's "The Best" awards. "We didn't get off to a good start but finished well, showing great attitude."

Kylian Mbappé, Rodrigo and Vinicius Junior scored a goal each as Madrid became the most successful club in the competition with four titles. It also won in 1960, 1998 and 2002.

Pachuca has never won the tournament, which brings together the champions of all six soccer confederations.

The competition is being played in a new format after FIFA ex-

panded the Club World Cup to 32 teams for 2025.

Madrid won the annual Club World Cup five times — in 2014, 2016, 2017-18 and 2022.

Eleven of Ancelotti's titles with Madrid have come in his second stint with the club, which began in 2021. Four of them, including a Champions League title, came during his time with Madrid from 2013-15.

Mbappé, who started after recovering from a left-thigh injury, opened the scoring after an assist by Vinicius in the 37th. Rodrigo added to the lead with a shot into the corner in the 53rd and Vinicius, named the men's player of the year on Tuesday, sealed the victory by converting an 84th-minute penalty kick.

Madrid made it straight to the final without having to play any matches as the European champion, while Pachuca advanced by defeating South American champion Botafogo and Al Ahly of Egypt in the preliminary rounds of the tournament taking place in Qatar. (AP)

## Atalanta dominant again with 6-1 win over Cesena in Italian Cup, Roma routs Sampdoria

**MILAN, Dec 19:** Serie A leader Atalanta continued its domination of domestic soccer this season with another hefty victory in the Italian Cup albeit against second-division Cesena.

Charles De Ketelaere and Lazar Samardzic both scored twice as Atalanta cruised to a 6-1 win to book a place in the quarterfinals against Bologna.

Roma also eased through against lower-league opposition, beating Sampdoria 4-1 to secure a last-eight match against AC Milan.

The quarterfinals will be played in February.

Fresh from a club record 10th straight league victory, Atalanta — which lost the cup final to Juventus last year —

showed no signs of easing up, even against lower league opposition.

Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini opted for a surprisingly strong starting lineup and Atalanta was 2-0 up in less than 10 minutes and 4-0 up by halftime following goals by Davide Zappacosta, De Ketelaere's double and Samardzic's first.

Marco Brescianini added a fifth early in the second half and Atalanta finally eased off the gas, although Samardzic doubled his tally in the 71st.

Substitute Joseph Ceasay netted a consolation goal in the final minute for Cesena.

Roma coach Claudio Ranieri steered his side to a morale-boosting victory over one of

his many former clubs and avoided a potential upset against Sampdoria, which had already knocked out two Serie A teams.

Roma had lost in the league 2-0 at Como, which was one of the top-flight teams Samp had beaten on its cup run — the other being city rival Genoa.

However, an early double from Artem Dovbyk and a delightful solo effort from Tommaso Baldanzi had Roma 3-0 up inside 25 minutes.

Gerard Yepes pulled one back for Samp in the 61st but Roma restored its three-goal advantage through substitute Eldor Shomurodov, moments after he replaced Dovbyk. (AP)



## Manu Bhaker's Olympic success becomes defining moment for Indian shooting in 2024

**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** If ever there was proof needed that Manu Bhaker had prodigious talent, she provided it at the Paris Olympics with two bronze medals, scripting history in a year when shooting was as much about success as it was about missing medals by wafer-thin margins.

Shooting is about individual glory and Manu took it to a different level by first finishing on the podium in 10m air pistol and then combining with an equally happy-go-lucky marksman Sarabjot Singh to clinch a second bronze in 10m mixed team to become India's first woman athlete with two medals in the quadrennial showpiece.

With a record 21 shooters in Paris, India finally ended nearly a decade-long medal drought in the sport, returning with three bronze, with the unassuming Swapnil Kusale, a TTE with Central Railways, finishing the campaign with a third-place finish in 50m rifle 3-positions.

The spotlight, though, was firmly on Manu following her Tokyo Games dejection three summers back, where a pistol malfunction had ended her hopes. Manu confidently stepped into

Chateauroux range on the outskirts of Paris as she gave a performance befitting a champion to end the country's medal drought.

The success was met with an outpouring of emotion for the champion and her coach Jaspal Rana, who had to go through nearly two years of trials and tribulations to achieve glory.

From being told to leave the shooting range due to a National Rifle Association of India SOP, to being forced to coach his ward from the spectators' gallery, Jaspal had to endure barbs and insults, which in a way steeled the duo to tackle the challenge in Paris head on.

The champion summed up her Paris success by saying that Jaspal was like a father figure who gave her a lot of courage whenever she felt unsure about herself. The relationship seems to have come a long way since a misunderstanding separated the two before the Tokyo Olympics, and with the 2028 Los Angeles Games up next, it can only mean more success for Manu.

Sarabjot too enjoyed phenomenal success following his share of injury travails, which left him down and out for more than six



months last year. There was a phase in the young Ambala shooter's career when he was not able to even lift his pistol, let alone repeat the exercise 60 times in competition.

But careful planning and rehabilitation, saw him emerge from the career-threatening injury, which occurred in March last year, to become the joint bronze-medallist with Manu.

For Swapnil, it was an opportunity to give his coach, Deepali Deshpande, a dream redemption. The former shooter choked with emotions when her ward won the

Singh Naruka found themselves heartbroken, finishing fourth in Paris but promising a glorious future for shooting sport.

Babuta, missed the men's 10m air rifle bronze, while the mixed skeet team of Maheshwari and Naruka lost the medal to China in a tense showdown.

Manu too missed a historic hat-trick, finishing fourth in the women's 25m sports pistol event after a heroic performance.

The lead-up to the Paris Olympics was marred by selection issues with the national federation's Olympic Selection Trials (OST) at the centre of a litigation and discontent among top shooters. The court petition called into question the criteria for the OST with only five shooters being allowed in each category. Several shooters, who had earned quota places for the country but not performed well in the OST, asked the federation to rethink its decision.

Shooters like men's 10m air rifle world champion Rudranksh Patil and women's 10m air rifle exponent Tilottama Sen missed out, while Sandeep Singh and Ramita took their place in the Paris-bound contingent. (PTI)

## Assam team departs for Kerala to compete in 27th Sub Jr Nat'l Sepak Takraw C'ship



**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Dec 19:** The Assam team, selected by the Assam Sepak Takraw Association, will participate in the 27th Sub-Junior National Sepak Takraw Championship to be held at Trikarpur in the Kasaragod district of Kerala from December 22 to 26, according to a press release issued by the general secretary of the Assam Sepak Takraw Association, Bishnu Ram Nunisa on Thursday.

A contingent of boys and girls,

comprising a total of 30 players and five match officials, departed for Kerala on Thursday. The team boarded the Vivek Express train from Guwahati Railway Station to participate in the championship, the release added.

It is noteworthy that the two teams, comprising boys and girls, were selected during a coaching camp organized at Titabor, Jorhat, held from December 3 to December 17. Nunisa also extended his best wishes to the entire team participating in the competition.

## Champions Trophy deadlock ends India to play its matches at neutral venue; Pak gets reciprocal arrangement

**DUBAI, Dec 19:** The deadlock over the hosting of next year's Champions Trophy finally ended on Thursday when the ICC announced that India will play their matches of the 50-over event at a neutral venue instead of host country Pakistan, which will get a similar arrangement for tournaments to be held in India till 2027.

The agreement will also extend to the 2028 women's T20 World Cup, which will be held in Pakistan. Although no formal announcement has been made, India's Champions Trophy matches are likely to be held in the UAE.

"The ICC Board has approved that all matches between India and Pakistan played at ICC Events during the current rights cycle from 2024 to 2027 (which are to be hosted in India or Pakistan) will be played at a neutral venue proposed by the tournament host," said the ICC in a statement, confirming what PTI reported on December 5.

The arrangement will also cover next year's women's World Cup in India and the T20 World Cup in 2026, to be jointly hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the event scheduled in February-March due to security concerns. The Indians have not played in Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai



terror attacks in which 150 people were killed. The two countries' last bilateral engagement was back in 2012.

Travelling to Pakistan also requires the Indian government's clearance which has remained firm on the status quo.

"The schedule for the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 is set to be confirmed soon," the ICC added.

The decision, which came after a series of back-channel talks, was on expected lines after the sport's governing body maintained

prolonged silence on the contentious matter during the previous set-up led by chairman Greg Barclay.

His successor Jay Shah took charge on December 1 and all stakeholders, including the Pakistan Cricket Board, the BCCI and the broadcasters, were running out of time to organise the 50-over event that was last played in the UK in 2017.

While BCCI's stance was always clear, the matter got stretched because of PCB's refusal to allow a "one-sided" arrangement of neutral venues. Led by Pakistan interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, the PCB was determined not to lose face in front of the local public.

PCB, which had sent its team to India for the ODI World Cup last year, had categorically opposed the hybrid model but eventually agreed to it on reciprocal grounds.

The PCB had earlier indicated that it wanted a greater share in the annual revenue cycle to accommodate the Indian demand for a hybrid model but there is no word yet on whether that has been discussed or accepted.

The tournament will feature eight teams, divided into two groups. The top two teams from each group will advance to the semi-finals. (PTI)

## Ashwin deserved a fitting farewell: Kapil Dev



**NEW DELHI, Dec 19:** Unable to comprehend R Ashwin's sudden decision to retire from international cricket, a shocked World Cup-winning skipper Kapil Dev says the premier off-spinner deserved a fitting farewell, ideally on home soil.

Ashwin stunned one and all by calling it quits on Wednesday, right after the Brisbane Test against Australia ended in a draw.

Kapil felt Ashwin seemed unhappy with something.

"I was shocked by how one of India's greatest cricketers chose to leave the game. The disappointment among the fans was widespread, but I also saw a tinge of hurt on his face. He looked unhappy, and that was sad. He deserved much better, a fitting farewell," Kapil said in a statement to PTI.

As has been his wont, Ashwin chose to walk his own way while retiring in the middle of an important series. Kapil said he would like to hear the Tamil Nadu man's side of the story.

"He could have waited and announced his retirement on Indian soil, but I don't know why Ashwin called it a day. I would want to hear his side of the story. Give him that respect. He has played 106 Tests for the country. I don't think anyone can match his humongous contribution to Indian cricket."

Kapil hoped that the Board of Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) would arrange a "grand farewell" to Ashwin.

"I'm sure the parent body of cricket in India, BCCI, shall plan a grand farewell for this giant match-winner of Team

India," he said.

Kapil, 65, said Ashwin was a stalwart, a versatile and unorthodox bowler, who constantly hustled the batters with his change of pace and cleverly disguised line and length.

"He was ready to experiment, and that is what set him apart. In a game where the batters get the most accolades, Ashwin stood out with his prowess.

"Ashwin was brave. He could bowl at any stage of the contest. Do you find bowlers with such tremendous tactical sense who can adapt quickly? He was his captain's go-to man," he said.

Praising both his cricketing brain and off-field character, Kapil said Ashwin was a match-winner with no parallel in modern cricket.

"He has won India's highest number of Man of the Series awards. That is a tremendous compliment that puts his game and consistency in perspective. He was not a "yes" man and came across as a gritty fighter.

"He was a rare spinner who could bowl with the new ball, just like Anil Kumble. Thank God I didn't have to play alongside him. I would have lost my place to Ashwin.

"He could bat, bowl, field. He had the carrom ball, a superb slower one; if need be, he could pull out a leg-spinner too. Amazing. He could do everything possible on the cricket field," he said, eulogising the man who ended with 537 Test wickets.

"Only a champion is not insecure, and Ashwin was a champion. He has given us great joy. I wish him all the joy of the world," he said. (PTI)

## Hazlewood 'frustrated' at missing remainder of India series due to 'random' injury



**BRISBANE, Dec 19:** Australia fast bowler Josh Hazlewood is "frustrated" by the timing of his injury after he was ruled out of the remaining two Tests against India due to a right calf strain sustained during the drawn third match at the Gabba.

Hazlewood, who had also missed the second Test (pink-ball) in Adelaide -- which Australia won by 10 wickets -- due to a side strain, described the latest injury as "random".

"Just frustrating really. Ticked every box heading into the (third) Test, I could understand if it was my side again, but it was just a random calf strain," he told 7NEWS. "It's just the timing again, they are only little 2-3 week injuries, it's just the timing of it and missing big games is the frustrating thing."

The 33-year-old Hazlewood was sent for scans after just one over of bowling on the fourth day after hurting his right calf in the warm-up before play. The injury only turned out to be a strain, but it's expected to be serious enough to end his home Test summer early.

"Obviously, do a deep dive into it and see what we can come up with ... feels pretty random," he said.

"I've had a history of sides and calves, they're probably the two things that have kept me out for the majority over the last four years.

"But yeah I sort of just keep adding another layer to the defence hopefully, get back into the gym, I've ticked a lot of boxes over the last 12 months."

Hazlewood said he does not want to rush back to action before regaining full fitness, which he is hoping to achieve by the two-match Test tour of Sri Lanka in late January and February.

"That's probably the goal, just take it as it comes over the next few weeks," he said.

"No rush to get anything in a hurry, it's just getting everything right. Probably take a few extra days here and there. Ticking things off and getting everything right." (PTI)

## IOC publishes manifestos of 7 candidates running to be president and lead Olympics

**GENEVA, Dec 19:** The seven candidates running for International Olympic Committee president had their manifestos published on Thursday, and one is offering to take just half of the eight-year mandate on offer and stand again in 2029. Sebastian Coe, the World Athletics president who turned 68 this year, pledged to embed "transformative change over the next four years" then seek re-election ahead of schedule.

Coe was among several candidates offering to give back to IOC members — who elect their president at a March 18-21 meeting near the site of Ancient Olympia in Greece — a decisive choice in picking future host cities. Under the hands-on presidency of Thomas Bach, who reaches his limit of 12 years in office next year, members now simply rubber-stamp a single host candidate that has worked with the IOC administration.

Two members of the Bach-chaired IOC executive board, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr. and Prince Feisal al Hussein, joined Coe in promising to empower members to have a bigger role in the Olympic body. They also promise to raise the retirement age for members from 70 to 75 years.

Members must be invited to join



the exclusive IOC club and the current 111 include European and Middle East royalty, leaders of international sports bodies, former and current Olympic athletes, politicians, diplomats, industrialists and an Oscar-winning actress.

Only IOC members can be presidential candidates and the other contenders are board member Kirsty Coventry and three more presidents of sports governing bodies: Johan Eliasch from skiing, David Lappartient from cycling, and Morinari Watanabe from gymnastics.

The manifesto releases are one of just two set-piece events in a mostly opaque campaign with strict rules to limit self-promotion and engagement with voters. Candidates will

present themselves to voters, though not take questions, at a Jan. 30 meeting at IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The IOC has had no female president and just nine men leading it in a 130-year history. Eight of those presidents were from Europe and one from the United States.

Coventry, the 41-year-old sports minister of Zimbabwe, is just the second female candidate ever to run for the IOC leadership and is widely seen as Bach's preferred choice to continue his policies.

Coventry and Coe are two-time Olympic champions in swimming and track, respectively. Coe also led organizing the 2012 London Olympics. Coe upset the IOC estab-

lishment — including some voters — this year by committing World Athletics to pay \$50,000 prize money to gold medalists in track and field at the Paris Olympics. The sport also will pay silver and bronze medalists at the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Games.

Though not specifying prize money, Prince Feisal called for Olympic athletes to be "properly valued" while Samaranch proposed letting athletes use footage of their performances on social media channels. That would relax strict IOC rules on Olympic athletes' ability to promote themselves. Challenges facing the IOC include picking a host for the 2036 Olympics, with India and Qatar in the mix, and looking at moving the Summer Games from its established July-August place in the modern sports calendar. The next IOC president also must address the impact of climate change on the global sports calendar, gender issues in sports, when and how to bring Russia back fully into the Olympic Games and signing a new U.S. broadcast deal. Long-time partner NBC's deal expires after the 2032 Brisbane Olympics and has been a foundation of Olympic revenue, which was \$7.6 billion in the 2021-24 Olympic cycle. (AP)

## Khel Maharan 2.0: LAC-level competitions kicks off in Barhampur

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Dec 19:** The assembly constituency level sports competition under 3rd phase of the Khel Maharan 2.0, the state's largest sports event, kicked off in Barhampur based Sports Complex playground on Thursday here. The event, which is part of the state-level Khel Maharan 2.0, will feature competitions in various sports disciplines.

The Barhampur zone of the Khel Maharan will see participation from around 4,000 athletes from 28 gram panchayats and one ULB under Barhamapur assembly constituency here. The event was inaugurated by the local MLA Jitu Goswami, who is also the president of the Khel Maharan.

The inaugural ceremony was attended by several dignitaries, including Kaliahor district BJP president Babul Bora, general secretary Arvind Choudhury, Purnigudam Mandal BJP president Mintu Sarma, and former athletes and sports organizers Prabhat Ch Bora and Mrinal Bora. The event also saw the participation of several prominent personalities from Barhampur, including the general secretary of the Barhampur Sports Association, Plaban Baruah.

The inaugural ceremony featured a flag-hoisting ceremony, a torch relay, and a procession by the athletes. The event also featured cultural programmes, including a performance by the Barhampur 9th Assam Police Battalion band party.

## Just-retired Ashwin returns home with 'zero regrets'; says retirement was instinctive

**CHENNAI, Dec 19:** There was the mandatory shower of flower petals, lots of smiles and a live band too as Ravichandran Ashwin returned home on Thursday after his shock international retirement in the middle of a Test series in Australia, insisting that he made an "instinctive" decision and is walking away with "zero regrets".

He landed at the Chennai International Airport early this morning and was escorted out by officials of the state cricket association. The 38-year-old owner of 765 international wickets did not speak to the waiting media there as he hopped into his car where his wife Priithi and two daughters were waiting for him.

However, once he reached home and was surrounded by his parents, and other well-wishers, Ashwin did oblige the waiting newsmen, opening up a bit about his decision.

"It's emotional for a lot of people, and may be it will sink in (in some time) but for me, personally, it is a great sense of relief and satisfaction. It was very instinctive and it has been running in my head for a while. I just felt (it) on Day 4 and I just called it a day," Ashwin said, referring to the drawn third Test in Brisbane.

"...it (retirement) is not a big decision as far as I am concerned because I am going to embrace a new path," he went on.

Asked if he regretted not being the captain of the national side, Ashwin dismissed the suggestion.

"I can't do it now. I have no such regrets. In fact, I have zero regrets. I have seen from a distance those people with regrets but I don't have any such regrets," asserted the bowler, who has 537 Test wickets to his credit, making him India's second highest wicket-taker in the format behind the great Anil Kumble (619).

As he entered his house, his parents embraced him and the seasoned bowler was garlanded too. A few from among the gathering took his autograph, shook hands and congratulated him for a stellar run as an India player.

"I never thought so many people will come here. I just wanted a quiet entry, and was looking forward to relax at home. But you have made my day. I have played Test cricket for so many years, but the last time (I saw something) like this was after the 2011 World Cup," he said.

Ashwin on Wednesday announced retirement with immediate effect in the middle of the five-match Test series that is



currently locked 1-1 after three games.

"To be honest, we all go through a lot in our career, not only for cricketers but in

election, as per the constitution.

"As the posts of Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer have been vacated, the same are required to be filled up for the remaining period at a Special General Meeting by way of elections," reads an official Board document which is in PTI's possession.

"In this regard, the Apex Council is requested to approve the appointment of Mr. Achal Kumar Jyoti, former Chief Election Commissioner of India, as the Electoral Officer to conduct BCCI elections at a Special General Meeting," it added.

The 71-year-old Jyoti, who is a retired 1975 batch Gujarat cadre IAS officer, served as India's chief election commissioner from July 2017 to January 2018.

## BCCI calls emergent apex council meet to appoint former CEC as electoral officer



general. Generally, when I go to sleep I remember a lot of things like taking wickets, making runs, but those memories are not

Currently, Assam's Devajit Saikia is performing the duties of Board's interim secretary, while the treasurer's position is lying vacant. BCCI's healthy bank balance got healthier this year with an approximate increase of ₹ 4200 crore, taking the overall earnings to a whopping ₹ 20,686 crore.

A major chunk of BCCI's revenue comes from the IPL media rights and bilateral cricket rights.

With India being the biggest cricket market in the world, the powerful board also gets a lion's share of revenue generated by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

Back in June 2022, the IPL media rights were sold for an astronomical ₹ 48,390 crore for a five-year period. (PTI)

there in the last two years.

"So, that was a clear indication that we need to take a different route now," Ashwin said.

"I have not set any new goals, as I just want to relax now. Actually, it's difficult for me to stay inactive, but I want to try that now," he added.

He will continue to play club cricket, including the IPL, where he will return to play for Chennai Super Kings next year.

"I think that part for me is still burning bright. I am going to play for CSK and don't be surprised if I aspire to play for as long as I can. I don't think Ashwin the cricketer is done. I think only Ashwin the Indian cricketer called time. That's it," he reiterated.

In the limited-overs format, being part of the 2011 World Cup and the 2013 Champions Trophy-winning teams would count among the major highlights of his 14-year career.

Ashwin played 116 ODIs for India, claiming 156 wickets, while his 65 T20 International outings yielded 72 scalps. His career began in 2010 in the one-day format before he made his Test debut a year later. (PTI)